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A publication of the University of Illinois Springfield

The accidental celebrity

**Patti Blagojevich's
family and friends
rally around her as
her husband's
trial looms**



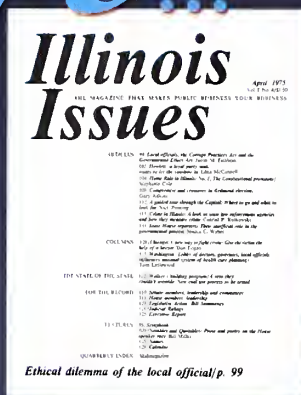
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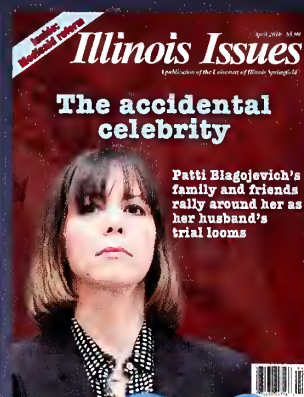
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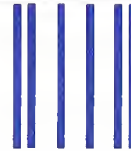
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KEVIN MCDERMOTT



The challenge of tackling a 21st century technological issue with a 19th century legislative process

by Kevin McDermott

On September 2, 2006, bicyclist Matt Wilhelm, 25, was riding along state Route 130 near Urbana when a car struck him from behind. Wilhelm died six days later. The driver had drifted off the road while downloading ringtones to her cell phone.

The tragedy prompted Illinois this year to join 18 other states in restricting cell phone use behind the wheel. But soon after the law's January 1 implementation, police declared its caveat-ridden language virtually unenforceable. "Damn near a waste of time," St. Clair County Sheriff Mearl Justus told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in late February, by which time his county of more than a quarter-million people had seen exactly one ticket under the new law. It was a similar story across the state.

The short-circuiting of what was supposed to be a landmark Illinois safety measure provides a lesson in the challenges of legislating complex new technology. It's also a reminder of some age-old political pitfalls.

The legislature, driven largely by Wilhelm's death, passed **House Bill 71**

last year, outlawing "driving while texting." Gov. Pat Quinn signed it in August, cautioning that "we get too distracted" with electronic communication behind the wheel.

That much is undebatable. Many believe "DWT" is as big a threat today as drunken driving. Studies show as many as 80 percent of drivers admit to cell phone use while driving. The National Safety Council says electronic distraction contributes to more than 1.6 million accidents a year. The threat mutates with every innovation in cell phones, global positioning satellite systems and other high-tech toys.

"Every time we think we have a handle on it, there's a new gadget," says state Rep. Bill Black, a Danville Republican. A co-sponsor of the new law, he admits he once ran a red light while fiddling with his GPS. "You can get so engrossed, trying to see that little red dot."

Black wants electronic distractions off the road entirely. But the Illinois bill that finally emerged navigated a line between vehicular safety and technological convenience. Its ban on

driving while "composing, reading or sending an electronic message" encompassed downloading ringtones and texting but didn't stop drivers from making phone calls or programming GPS systems.

This splitting of technological hairs wasn't entirely indefensible. Studies suggest that within the realm of dangerous electronic distractions, texting is particularly dangerous. A Virginia Tech study last year found that among truckers, dialing a cell phone made a driver 5.9 times more likely to cause an accident, while text messaging increased the likelihood 23.2 times.

The trouble with Illinois' half-measure law (aside from the sobering notion that a six-fold increase in accidents doesn't quite rise to the level of legislative imperative) is a problem of enforceability. Simply put, the banned and the permitted activities look the same, employing the same devices, even the same buttons. Soon after the law was implemented, police throughout Illinois reported they were writing few tickets because it was impossible to tell what drivers were doing on their

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phones while they cruised by, eyes down in their laps.

"They can still dial a cell phone number, which looks an awful lot like texting," Greene County State's Attorney Matt Goetten told the *Jacksonville Journal-Courier*. The question of what it would take to get a solid ease against a driver was answered in Ottawa, where police didn't write their first "DWT" ticket until March — and then, according to the *Ottawa Times*, only because the driver left her phone, with a half-written text message on it, sitting in plain view of the officer after she was pulled over.

This is partly the challenge of tackling a 21st century technological issue with a 19th century legislative process. We're seeing other examples of this every year, as lawmakers struggle to address cyber-stalking, identity theft, Internet gambling and other new high-tech threats. At this writing, the General Assembly is pondering teenage "sexting," a new twist on the dark old specter of child sexual exploitation — one in which the tool of the crime is in every pocket and purse, and the kid involved is both victim and perpetrator. This isn't your parents' legislative environment.

Still, the enforcement problems with the texting law were predictable. Worse, they were predicted. Here's part of the Senate floor debate from May 13 on **HB 71**, between Sen. James Meeks, Democrat from Calumet City, and the bill's co-sponsor, Sen. Martin Sandoval, a Cicero Democrat:

MEEKS: *Marty, I'm awfully concerned about this piece of legislation. ... When I'm in my vehicle, how will a policeman know whether or not I'm texting or making a phone call? You have to push the same buttons to make a phone call as you have to do to send a text ...*

SANDOVAL: *... [The police officer] can verify, while checking your device, that you did not send a text.*

MEEKS: *All right, so you do admit that sending a text and making a phone call looks similar to a police officer?*

SANDOVAL: *... There is no doubt that the use of any handheld device, [such as] your cell phone and the GPS, would ... make you look very suspect that you are texting.*

Technological labyrinth aside, the driving-while-texting bill was, arguably, quintessential "bad law." The reasons have nothing to do with gleaming new gadgetry but with the age-old conflict between governance and politics.

If you accept the premise that electronic distraction behind the wheel is a law-worthy problem, the logical solution is a straightforward, easily enforceable law: No use of electronic devices while driving, period. If the cop sees you jabbing at your palm while you're cruising along I-55, you're getting a ticket.

But that good-government imperative ran into a hard political reality: Illinoisans are used to unfettered access to their cell phones. As happens with new technology, this thing we couldn't have imagined a few years ago has become something we can't imagine doing without, even briefly. We're a sprawling, busy, chatty, asphalt-laden state, and the three-hour drive from Chicago to Springfield is about two and a half hours longer than most of us are willing to be alone with our thoughts.

"I was at a funeral (recently), and cell phones went off four separate times," says Black, noting the difficulty of getting people to power down for a while. He likens it to the drunken-driving debate that raged in Illinois a generation ago — a debate that is effectively over now, as virtually everyone involved has come around to a zero-tolerance approach. He predicts a similar evolution on the electronic-distraction issue, as more Matt Wilhelm tragedies seep into the public consciousness.

"Will it be outlawed in a year? No. In two years? No. Five years? Maybe. ... I think that day is not far off," says Black. "Eventually, the public is going to say, 'Enough.'"

Kevin McDermott is Springfield bureau chief for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

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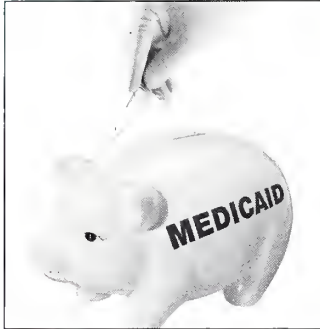
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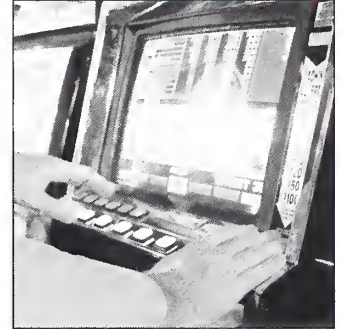
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Jamey Dunn



One man tries to do it all for power agency

by Jamey Dunn

Auditor general findings that a state agency has no official budget, financial reports, formal planning process or even basic office supplies are a bit shocking. According to a recent state audit, the Illinois Power Agency has paid its bills late, collected fees late and turned in travel vouchers late since its creation two years ago.

One might look over such results and shake his or her head at more inept bureaucracy in Illinois — government wasting money on a bloated agency that cannot even submit paperwork on time. However, the Illinois Power Agency is not your typical agency (see *Illinois Issues*, July/August 2009, page 25). The most obvious distinction is staffing levels. The Power Agency consists of one person, director Mark Pruitt.

The General Assembly created the Illinois Power Agency after a 10-year rate freeze on electricity expired in 2007. Consumers started to put pressure on lawmakers when they saw their electric bills soar. “My friends on the [electricity] generation side don’t like me saying this, but it was a price shock that caused the Illinois Power Agency to come into existence,” Pruitt says.

The primary objective of the agency is to procure power for Illinois utility companies. Commonwealth Edison, the company that serves northern Illinois, and Ameren Illinois, which serves central and southern Illinois, do not own power

The Power Agency creation coincided with the economic and budget crisis in Illinois.

plants or generate electricity. Since both companies have power generating entities — Exelon Generation and Ameren Generation, respectively — in their corporate families, accusations of conflicts of interest were tainting the power buying process.

According to a complaint filed by the attorney general’s office, Exelon won more than 97 percent of ComEd’s contracts through a 2006 power auction.

So the Power Agency provides a buffer to avoid collusion and sets a benchmark for rates to ensure that they are in line with market values. Any bids over the benchmark price are tossed out. Then bids are chosen based entirely on cost — the cheapest accepted first. “People can trust that when the bill shows up, that they know that price came from somewhere. It came from a process that hasn’t been finagled by ... some collusive group of manufacturers of electricity,” Pruitt says.

Pruitt characterizes himself as a broker. “We set up the transactions so that all several million Illinois consumers don’t have to do their own indi-

vidual transactions.” The agency’s first procurement last year resulted in about an 8 percent reduction in Ameren customers’ bills and a 9 percent reduction in ComEd customers’ bills.

“We think that the Illinois Power Agency is keeping rates low. The process has worked the way we had hoped it would work,” says David Kolata, executive director of the Citizens Utility Board.

The Power Agency creation coincided with the economic and budget crisis in Illinois. Pruitt says that when he took the job, members of then-Gov. Rod Blagojevich’s administration told him many organizational duties would be covered by sharing staff with other agencies. “I pointed out I don’t have an administrative background. So I am going to need someone to do things from travel vouchers to filing contracts. I need those functions handled for me.”

That help never materialized, and Pruitt says that he now wishes he had been more skeptical of the offer that was never fleshed out into a specific plan.

Pruitt says he has not hired any permanent staff — he contracts consultants to advise on power procurement — because of the way the agency is funded. It started out with seed money appropriated by the General Assembly in fiscal years 2008 and 2009. The agency has to pay back the money by fiscal year 2011 and then survive off a fund maintained by the

state treasurer. That fund has taken a hit in the economic downturn. Fees collected from bidders go toward paying expert consultants.

Pruitt estimates the seed money will be repaid in May. "Then I will be in a position to hire someone and know that I can pay them."

The audit charges Pruitt with being too prudent with the original appropriations. From the audit: "Due to budget constraints, an additional employee was not hired. However, it should be noted the agency had unexpended balances of \$273,728 and \$1,250,000 for fiscal years 2009 and 2008, respectively." Almost every one of the 22 findings recommends hiring more staff as part of the solution.

Pruitt says finding an operating officer is his first hiring priority. He is looking for someone who can handle financial responsibilities, monitor legislation and communicate with other agencies. Pruitt says he is talking with other agencies about sharing some staff members that he would not need as full-time workers. "I know from the audit I need a fiscal person. We will find one."

He also wants to hire a statistician and researcher in the near future.

Another function of the agency is to encourage procurement of renewable energy, with a goal of 25 percent of the power it buys coming from renewable sources by 2025. Pruitt says a researcher could help plan for the future, as well as help the agency reach that goal. "What's the next thing that we need to be looking for out there? Is it smart grid? Is it long-range transmission of wind energy from the upper plains? Is it renewable [energy]? Is it retirement of coal plants? Is it Futuregen? What are the next things that are coming that the agency needs to gear up for?"

But Pruitt does not believe the agency should ever have a large workforce. "I've always taken it that [the legislature] envisioned it being small, that it used outside expertise and it wasn't going to build its own little empire. That it was to be as tied into the most current thinking as was available."

He says the audit finding that he does not have basic office supplies has made him the butt of a few jokes: "I got an anonymous pad of paper delivered to

He is looking for someone who can handle financial responsibilities, monitor legislation and communicate with other agencies.

me." Pruitt adds that he has access to everything he needs now but will need more supplies and even offices as staff grows. "I really want us to be frugal because it's easier to loosen up on restrictions over time if necessary. It's almost impossible to tighten down."

As for filling positions that require more expertise, Pruitt is not sure that will happen soon. Two bureau chief positions described in the law that created the Power Agency require applicants to have 10 years' experience and not work for a utility for two years before or after the job.

"A bureau is an area of expertise or activity that is distinctive within an agency. So right now, the Bureau of Procurement is me when I sit at my desk, and I've got my procurement files open on the computer and my procurement file cabinet open. When that bureau closes, the Bureau of Asset Development opens up, and I open up a separate set of files," he says.

Pruitt takes responsibility for the reporting problems that the audit uncovered. "That was entirely my fault. I was hired as a subject matter expert and not so much as an experienced agency administrator, and it took me admittedly quite a while to learn how to create accounts within the comptroller's office." But, he says after some patient instruction from the comptroller's staff, things are getting better. "I'll get things filed within a day. It's easy — once you know what to do — it's easy."

One of the functions of the agency is to bring more transparency to the process of buying electricity. So the fact that there is no formal accounting process and no Web site on which to post the yearly procurement plans is a major shortfall.

Pruitt says he is not trying to hide anything but was putting his time into the main purpose of the agency — buying

the cheapest power possible. "Did I err on the side of ensuring that we got the core mission done over administrative functions? Yes I did."

And he says the agency has been successful in fulfilling that mission. "This was a theoretical system that was put forward that had never been tried before, and we made it work. It's like designing a car and having the first one come off the assembly line. Oh, it starts, it rolls and it stops — brilliant."

Pruitt adds: "The audit findings were not of the nature where I was carrying sacks of money out of the agency. ... I am as transparent as I can be, given what I have."

But in Illinois, sacks of money have been carried out the door in other agencies in the past, and citizens have had to listen to reports of rampant corruption, most recently associated with the man who gave Pruitt his job.

"Having audit findings and your name in the paper and things like that is embarrassing for me. But I don't view any of it as being undue criticism at all. And I wish that there weren't any and that I had known what I should have been doing a little bit better. But given the circumstances of the timing and the restrictions, I think that we can be successful in our next audit. We're not going to have a repeat of any of those findings," Pruitt says. "I guess in my first year, I'm begging a little bit of forgiveness."

Kolata agrees: "I think first and foremost, what consumers care about is the results, that the procurement go well and that their rates go in the right direction. ... Overall, I think consumers have reason to be pleased with the performance of the [Illinois Power Agency] so far."

And people probably do care more about their bills going down than whether the Power Agency put its plan on a Web site, and maybe even more than they care about the agency's accounting practices. But that does not give the Illinois Power Agency a free pass. Pruitt has faced serious budget and staffing constraints, and he has taken responsibility for the problems in his agency. But once he can hire some help, fixing those shortfalls should be top priority. □

BRIEFLY

LEGISLATIVE CHECKLIST

The primary election campaigns that kept legislators away from the Capitol for most of January had hardly concluded when the General Assembly returned to Springfield in February. From moving Election Day to later in the year to eliminating a statewide office, proposals affecting Illinois' electoral process abound. Here are some of the proposed reforms and other measures the legislature will consider during its spring session:



Primary dates

SB 355 Gov. Pat Quinn signed a bill that will move Illinois' primary election from the first Tuesday in February to the third Tuesday in March. The measure was sponsored by Democratic Sen. Deanna Demuzio of Carlinville.

HB 4448 House Minority Leader Tom Cross' bill would move the primary from February to the third Tuesday in March in presidential election years and the third Tuesday in June for all other primary elections.



Lieutenant governor

HB 5820 Lieutenant governor and governor candidates would run as a team in primary elections, under a measure proposed by Rep. Lou Lang, a Skokie Democrat.

HJRCA 50 A constitutional amendment proposed by House Speaker Michael Madigan would eliminate the lieutenant governor position in 2015. If the measure passes, it would have to be approved by voters.



Voters guide

HB 4842 The House approved a measure that would require the State Board of Elections to post candidate information online before primary elections. As of now, the board is only required to do so before general elections. The measure is sponsored by Chicago Democratic Rep. Barbara Flynn Currie.



Prisoner count

HB 4650 The U.S. Census would begin using preincarceration addresses to count prisoners in the Illinois Department of Corrections (see *Illinois Issues*, January, page 30). The measure is proposed by Rep. La Shawn Ford, a Chicago Democrat.



Thomson prison sale

HB 4744 The House advanced a measure that would require General Assembly approval for any sale of state property worth \$1 million or more. Sponsored by Republican Rep. Michael Tryon of Crystal Lake, the bill would effectively stop Gov. Pat Quinn from selling the little-used Thomson Correctional Center in northwest Illinois. The federal government is seeking to purchase a facility for housing terrorism suspects.



Free rides for seniors

HB 4654 The House voted to roll back former Gov. Rod Blagojevich's policy to allow all seniors to ride mass transit for free. The measure would eliminate free rides for seniors who don't meet low-income eligibility requirements. All seniors would continue to ride at half-fare.



Tuition waivers

SB 365 Legislators would no longer be allowed to grant General Assembly tuition waivers to students if they or their parents had recently contributed to that member's political campaign. The measure, sponsored by Chicago Democrat and Senate President John Cullerton, was approved in both chambers.

HB 4685 Under a measure approved by the House, legislators would no longer be allowed to give constituents state university tuition waivers. The bill is sponsored by Rep. Mark Walker, an Arlington Heights Democrat.



Managed care

HB 5086 A measure proposed by Rep. Linda Chapa LaVia, an Aurora Democrat, would create a task force to review Gov. Pat Quinn's plan for an Integrated Care Pilot Program affecting senior, disabled and blind

citizens in the collar counties. If approved, it could slow down the managed care program expected to be phased in starting in October.



Credit history

HB 4658 Employers wouldn't be allowed to consider credit history when making hiring decisions, under a measure sponsored by Rep. Jack Franks, a Marengo Democrat.



Redistricting

SJRCA 104 A constitutional amendment proposed by Senate Minority Leader Christine Radogno would change the way Illinois draws its map for legislative districts. Instead of the legislature, a committee would draw the map, and lawmakers would vote to approve it. If the General Assembly could not agree on a map, the chief justice of the Illinois Supreme Court and a justice from the other party would choose a "special master" to create the map.



University borrowing

SB 642 Universities would be given the power to borrow money to fund their operating budgets. The loans would be in anticipation of receiving overdue payments from the state, and the schools could borrow up to 75 percent of what the state owes them. The bill, sponsored by Sen. William Haine, an Alton Democrat, passed in the Senate.



Unfunded mandates

HB 4711 The measure, sponsored by Hutsonville Republican Rep. Roger Eddy, would allow schools to ignore General Assembly mandates unless they came with specific funding. It would not apply to certain programs, including those required for high school graduation, those associated with state assessments, special education and transportation.



Rape kit testing

HB 4765 The House approved a bill sponsored by Franks that would require the Illinois State Police to analyze all sexual assault evidence within six months of receipt, if funding and resources are available.

Rachel Wells and Jamey Dunn

Civic group issues dire budget warning

Illinois can be pulled back from “the brink of financial disaster” if the state reforms its pension systems, cuts billions and raises income tax rates, says a nonpartisan business-related group.

The Chicago-based Civic Federation suggested in mid-February that the state, which is facing a \$12.8 billion budget deficit, make cuts of at least \$2.5 billion and reform its pension systems by means that include shrinking benefits for new employees. If those things are accomplished, the group recommends hiking the personal state income tax rate from 3 percent to 5 percent and the corporate rate from 4.8 percent to 6.4 percent. The report also says the state should repeal the income tax exemption for federally taxed portions of retirement and Social Security income and enact a \$1 a pack increase in cigarette taxes.

“A fundamental conclusion of our report is that the state of Illinois’ financial crisis was not significantly created by the economic downturn and the recession; it was overwhelmingly created by the state’s pension underfunding and its failure to balance its budget for several years by borrowing and ignoring our liabilities and pushing bills into the future years,” says Civic Federation president Laurence Msall, who is also on the *Illinois Issues* advisory board. “That’s not sustainable, and we are frightened by the proximity to financial collapse that the state now finds itself and are urging the governor and General Assembly to not make the situation worse and deal with it now because it will only be more expensive and actions more painful if we do not.”

Gov. Pat Quinn’s Office of Management and Budget provided information to the Civic Federation during the preparation of the report, spokeswoman Kelly Kraft said in an e-mail message.

“We believe their report represents a positive step forward in the ongoing dialogue necessary to address our state’s fiscal crisis,” Kraft said. “The Quinn Administration will continue to review the Civic Federation’s recommendations and work with the group during the upcoming budget debate.”

Political scientist Kent Redfield says: “There’s a fiscal reality out there that unless you’re willing to shut down state government or cut off state aid to education and local governments by \$2 [billion] or \$3 billion, then you’re going to have to cut back in spending and probably do some borrowing to get over the hump. Whether the General Assembly is actually going to engage that this spring is anybody’s guess. ... I don’t think the House Democrats are willing to pass a revenue bill or a realistic budget without having GOP participation. That’s not happening at this point.

“I think there’s certainly a possibility we’re going to pass a half-year budget without near enough money to support state government,” says Redfield, a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois Springfield. “A look at that from a cynical perspective says they’re going to do something in



the fall or dump it on whomever the new governor is — if we have a new governor who’s a Republican, we may just pass on it, and so it may not be addressed until January. I’m not discounting that there will be something this spring; it just certainly right now suggests it might be November or next February before we really address the revenue side.”

The report’s call for increased sacrifice drew opposition from the state’s largest union, Council 31 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, which has already agreed to unpaid furlough days and deferred pay increases and changes in medical coverage that union spokesman Anders Lindall says will save “tens of millions of dollars.” The report is available at <http://www.civiced.org>.

Maureen Foertsch McKinney

For updated news see the *Illinois Issues* Web site at <http://illinoisissues.uis.edu>

BRIEFLY

State's pension funding tabbed as worst in the nation

The Pew Center on the States recently tagged Illinois with an unflattering distinction in a report about the gap between what states have set aside to pay for pensions and what they will need.

"Illinois ranks last in the country in terms of what it has set aside to fund this bill coming due," the report states. At the time of the report, only 54 percent of the state's pension liability was funded, an amount "well below the 80 percent benchmark that the U.S. Government Accountability Office says is preferred by experts."

"The total pension liability — \$54.4 billion — is more than three times as large as the payroll for members of the state's pension plans. The Prairie State has consistently failed to meet the annual actuarially required contribution, paying less than 60 percent of the required amount in each year since 2005," the report states.

The February report covered data from 2008, and the fiscal year 2009 numbers for Illinois are even worse — as are those projected for 2010.

In fiscal year 2009, the unfunded pension liability in Illinois was \$77.8 billion,

for a funded ratio of just 38.5 percent (see *Illinois Issues*, February, page 15).

"The [Gov. Pat] Quinn administration strongly believes that immediate and decisive action needs to be taken to reform the pension system," says Kelly Kraft, spokeswoman for the governor's Office of Management and Budget.

"Inadequate funding to the pension system has been taking place for many years, long before Gov. Quinn took office. In December, the state made a positive step to reforming the system by funding the fiscal year 2010 contribution. The state issued \$3.466 billion in general obligation bonds to meet the state's required deposit to its pension systems for fiscal year 2010. We are also continuing to examine solutions to funding pensions that include securing appropriate funding sources, creating new revenue streams and continuing to modernize and reform the current system."

Kraft noted that the governor's Pension Modernization Task Force issued a report in November that suggests that "full actuarial calculated payments to the pension systems based on both actual cost and

unfunded liability must be made and that it is up to the General Assembly and the governor to make that happen."

Nationally, Pew found a \$1 trillion gap at the end of fiscal year 2008 between money set aside to pay promised retirement benefits and the \$3.35 trillion cost. In stark contrast to Illinois, state pension systems overall were 84 percent funded. In 2008, just four states — Florida, New York, Washington and Wisconsin — were fully funded.

Eight states had pension systems that were more than 30 percent unfunded. Illinois and Kansas shared the distinction of having less than 60 percent of assets available, according to the report.

Illinois and New Jersey were cited in the report as "examples of poor financial decision-making, as both states have actively reduced contributions over the past 10 years, leading to chronic underfunding." As Kraft noted, the pensions were funded for fiscal year 2010.

The report is available at <http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org>.

Maureen Foertsch McKinney



**Updates
to listings in the
2010 Roster
of State
Government Officials**

**are available at
the *Illinois Issues***

Web site:

<http://illinoisissues.uis.edu>

League pushes to get Constitution change

The League of Women Voters is leading a petition drive to amend the Illinois Constitution to change the way legislative districts are drawn after the current U.S. Census count.

"Article 4, the legislative section, is the only place in the Constitution that allows for the public to amend it," says Mary Schaafsma, spokeswoman for the league. "Since the legislature is not doing a good job at drawing the districts, we want to let the public weigh in on [the proposed amendment's] merits."

The Illinois Constitution can be amended in two ways: through the legislature or through citizen petition.

Currently, if the members of the General Assembly cannot agree on a legislative district map, the leaders choose four Democrats and four Republicans to serve on a committee to create a new map. Luck of the draw, literally, of a name — recently from a replica of Abraham Lincoln's stovepipe hat — determines the

tie-breaking ninth member. Historically, the party of the ninth member has gained control of state government.

In the past three decades, legislators have not been able to agree on a map. In 1980, the Democrats won the tie-breaking draw. In 1990, it was the Republicans, and after the 2000 Census, it was the Democrats. The party that wins the draw can create districts that protect incumbents and consolidate voting patterns to gain or retain power in the General Assembly. Referred to as "gerrymandering," the result often forms odd-shaped districts.

Joined by such groups as the Better Government Association, the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform, the Illinois Chamber of Commerce and the Illinois Farm Bureau, the league is working to obtain 500,000 signatures by early April to get on the November ballot. Schaafsma says about 300,000 are required, but the league wants to get more than enough to survive any challenges. If the league and its partners obtain enough signatures by May 3, members will spend the summer and fall explaining what the amendment

Libraries take a snapshot of services

With libraries across the state facing budget cuts, the Illinois Library Association set out to take a “snapshot” of services that libraries provided on one day to illustrate their value to surrounding communities and state and local officials.

Libraries throughout Illinois, including public, school and university facilities, recorded statistics, took testimonials and snapped photographs on February 10. Library staff counted how many people visited the library, how many used the computer, how many accessed library resources online, how many participated in programs and the number of books and other items checked out.

Denise Zielinski, director of informational services for the DuPage Library System, heard about the original Library Snapshot Day held in New Jersey last year and planned one for her library system in west suburban Illinois last October. She counts the project as a success, and her system uses the information for community outreach as well as for lobbying legislators.

will do. If the public agrees to the amendment, the Constitution will be changed.

Republican lawmakers have introduced a measure that mirrors the League of Women Voters’ amendment to attempt to make the change through legislation, but most Statehouse watchers do not believe it can get the necessary three-fifths vote majority in the Democrat-controlled General Assembly.

The Democrats have offered their own version of a constitutional amendment to reform the mapmaking process.

The one point all parties agree on is that Illinois — the only state in the nation to rely on chance to determine its mapmakers — needs to change the process.

“There’s a general consensus that we move away from such an arbitrary way we draw the map,” says Sen. Kwame Raoul, chairman of the Senate Democrats’ Redistricting Committee.

The Democratic plan keeps the authority to draw the legislative district lines with the General Assembly but calls for more public meetings during the process. Raoul, a Chicago Democrat, says a legislatively

Officials at the Illinois Library Association liked the idea and decided to take it statewide.

The association is still working to compile the results from its survey. Zielinski says that with 200 libraries counted, about 500,000 people accessed databases and other resources online on the snapshot day. “You don’t have to walk through the door to use the library,” she says.

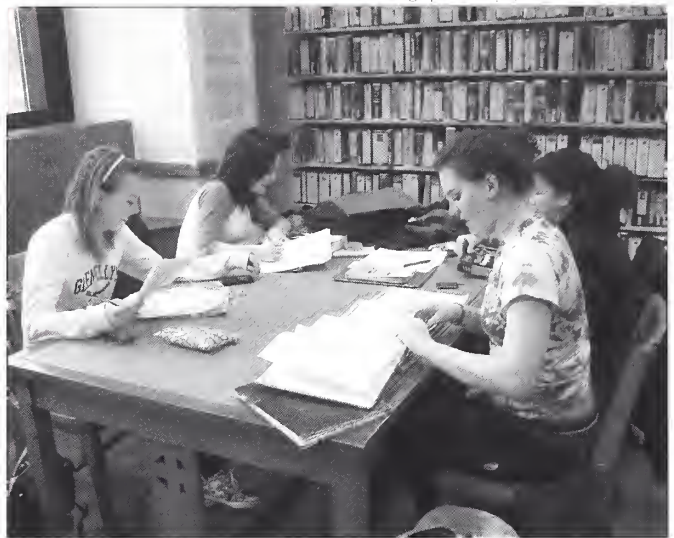
Zielinski says that the economic downturn has sent more people to libraries to apply for jobs online and get help with skills such as résumé creation and things as simple as attaching a document to an e-mail. She adds that some patrons use the library as a workspace “because they could no longer afford an office, so now the library has become their office.”

drawn map is more representative of the people, “with 177 voices” giving their opinion as opposed to a nine-member commission.

“The Fair Map Amendment would empower [legislative] leaders more,” Raoul says. “And, such a small commission doesn’t allow for enough diversity, diversity in every form — geographic, racial, economic.”

Raoul says the Democratic amendment is based on the plan developed three years ago at the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute in Carbondale. Director David Yepsen says it’s not a matter of either/or. “The Democratic plan is reform, the Republican/League [of Women Voters] plan is reform, and we’re for reform.”

Yepsen says both plans have elements of the Simon plan. “They tend to drive each other. The League and Republicans think their plan is best, and the Democrats know they have to produce, or they will be looking at the Republican plan on the ballot in November.”



The Glen Ellyn Library participated in the statewide event A Snapshot of a Day in the Life of Your Library on February 10.

Dawn Bussey, executive director of the Glen Ellyn Public Library, agrees. She says some people who sought help with job searches have come back and thanked the staff, saying the things they learned at the library helped them get a job.

Zielinski says the morale boost that the snapshot day gave to library workers was an unintended positive outcome. “The comments that [the staff] got from their patrons, the library users, were incredible.”

The reasons visitors gave for coming to the Glen Ellyn Library on snapshot day were varied and included getting books for family members, conducting online job searches, catching up on correspondence, going to a book club, delivering books to shut-ins and playing games.

Bussey says her library will be working with a flat budget this year, which means some cuts to programs and new material purchases. “The prices go up, but we have the same number of dollars to spend.”

Zielinski says one of the goals of the snapshot was to help libraries avoid cuts. She says now is not the time to ask for more funding. But, she hopes the snapshot will show that libraries provide important services and will persuade officials not to cut their budgets.

“We’re asking, ‘Could you just leave us alone? We are being used. Your money is going to a great cause.’ All we really want is — just don’t cut us,” she says.

Beverley Scobell

Jamie Dunn

Chicago Black Renaissance movement houses get landmark status



The Lorraine Hansberry home at 6140 S. Rhodes Ave.



The interior of the George Cleveland Hall Branch Library



The Richard Wright home at 4831 S. Vincennes

The Pulitzer Prize-winning writer and Illinois poet laureate Gwendolyn Brooks was a well-known author when she and her husband purchased their Chicago home at 7428 S. Evans Ave., where she lived for more than four decades. That

KIDS COUNT Report says poverty among kids rising

As poverty is on the rise in Illinois, an advocacy group for children warns that social service programs that help poor kids are at risk.

"It's a tough time to be a kid as more and more families find themselves in economic distress," says Kathy Ryg, president of Voices for Illinois Children, which recently released its Illinois Kids Count 2010 report, supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

"The data shows that children will continue to suffer the effects in increasing numbers over the next couple of years. So while the 2008 poverty level for children on average in Illinois is 17 percent, in 2012 that will trend upwards to 22 percent — 650,000 Illinois children." Poverty is defined by the federal government as an income below \$22,000 a year for a family of four.

The state in the last year has seen evidence of the growth in poverty through increased applications for such services as food stamps and Temporary Aid to Needy Families, says Michelle Saddler, secretary of the Illinois Department of Human Services. "The [food stamp] program is one where we've seen people apply

who've never applied for assistance before." Applications for food stamps were up 32 percent from January 2009 to January 2010.

"The data also demonstrates that children who grow up under conditions of extreme poverty are less likely to do well in school and are less likely to have a decent job and [more likely to] have poor health — actually more than decent jobs, we know they have lower learning as adults," Ryg says.

"The good news out of the report is we know that as recently as 2008, Illinois has been a leader in the nation in policies and programs that have proven outcomes, positive outcomes for kids, and we have to maintain those programs," she says.

She cited as proven programs the state-supported Preschool for All, All Kids insurance, child care assistance, mental health projects and child abuse prevention. Such programs were cut by \$1 billion in fiscal year 2010 and are threatened with further cuts by a state budget that is projected to have a \$13 billion deficit in fiscal year 2011.

"We know how harmful it is for kids to live in poverty conditions, but we also know what supports can lead to good outcomes, and so we have to have adequate revenues to invest to ensure those programs and services are available to the

children and families who need them the most," Ryg says. Voices for Illinois Children supports an income tax increase and reforms that include tax credits for low-income, working families. "If the state doesn't find a balanced revenue or budget solution, these vulnerable children are at increased risk if more programs get cut."

Saddler says: "I fear we will not be exempt from cuts in the future, and we have to be careful to use our resources as wisely as we can. We want and have to acknowledge the budget realities. We have to recognize that our dollars are limited, and we have to be good stewards of the dollars we have. So as we look at data-driven, evidence-based decisions, we are identifying the programs that are most effective for families and children and that we maximize federal dollars."

For instance, the state has received \$17.2 million in assistance from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to hire temporary workers to process food stamp applications and to pay state workers' overtime costs. Also, federal dollars have paid for a 15 percent reduction in the co-pay for state-supported child care and a 60-day extension in the time families can receive supplemented child care while looking for work.

The report is available at <http://www.voices4kids.org>.

Maureen Foertsch McKinney

structure and three others associated with the Chicago Black Renaissance literary movement were named landmarks by the City Council in February.

The Chicago Black Renaissance movement refers to the decades between 1930 and into the 1950s, when African-American citizens encouraged artistic expression, community organizing, social activity and the teaching of black history. At the time, most of Chicago's African-American population lived on the city's south side, where residents dealt with segregation, overcrowding, poor housing and high rent. In response to the situation, many began to write to show their frustration.

Brooks gained much of the inspiration for her works from her life in Chicago. *Maud Martha*, a semi-autobiographical novel, depicts the racism and sexism she experienced in her life. *A Street in Bronzeville*, Brooks' first book of poetry,

expressed the oppression and racism experienced by African-Americans in cities and the military. Both works brought critical acclaim to Brooks.

Author Richard Wright often used his decade in Chicago as a basis for his work. His most famous book, *Native Son*, set on the south side, describes how racism caused a young man to commit murder. The city also designated Wright's apartment at 4831 S. Vincennes Ave., where he lived for three years before financial hardships forced him to move.

The Lorraine Hansberry House at 6140 S. Rhodes Ave. was also named a landmark. Some of Hansberry's experiences in the home contributed to her famous play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Hansberry's father, Carl, waged a three-year legal battle to live in the home, which resulted in a 1940 U.S. Supreme Court decision to end discriminatory housing covenants within Chicago.

The George Cleveland Hall Branch of the Chicago Public Library at 4801 S. Michigan Ave. was a community gathering place through the 1930s. It offered an African-American history club, storytelling events, drama clubs and "appreciation hours" that acknowledged black contributions to the arts and literature. The library was also home to an extensive collection of African-American history books and literature.

Lisa DiChiera, advocacy director of Landmarks Illinois, an organization devoted to historic preservation, says she is happy to see that the council gave the homes landmark designation. "It's great to see people within the community realizing the historical and architectural significance of a building and taking a role in preservation." The designation of a landmark in the city of Chicago protects the structure from demolition.

Melissa Weissert

Feds offer millions to fight Asian carp

While the possibility of a U.S. Supreme Court case seeking closure of two Chicago waterway locks remains open, the federal government is looking to put into motion a \$78.5 million cooperative plan to keep Asian carp out of the Great Lakes.

The invasive species has been moving up the Mississippi, Missouri and Illinois rivers since the 1990s, when flooding allowed the carp to escape from retention ponds. They have since consumed more than their share of plankton, the basis of the local food chain, keeping other fish from getting enough food and weakening their populations.

Environmental DNA testing for Asian carp in the Chicago Area Waterway System shows traces of the fish's genetic material beyond the area's last defense — an underwater electric barrier on the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal. While authorities have not found Asian carp beyond the barrier, the eDNA finding raises further alarm that the fish will become the next of more than 180 aquatic invasive species to infiltrate the Great Lakes since the early 1800s.

"We can and will stop the Asian carp from establishing themselves in the Great Lakes," said Nancy Sutley, chairwoman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, following the announcement of the new strategy for protecting Lake Michigan. She deemed the \$78.5 million investment — and a list of 25 short- and long-term actions — an "unparalleled effort" in combating invasive species.

As part of the strategy, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will study possible changes to operation of the Chicago navigational

locks. Every year, 14.6 million tons of raw materials and 15,000 recreational boats travel through the locks, two factors that the Army Corps will consider in its evaluations. Proposed changes could include limiting lock openings to a few days each week or closing the locks every other week. The agency expects to begin implementing strategies based on its findings by the end of the month.

Other elements of the plan include increased fish and eDNA sampling, speeding up research on how to keep Asian carp from breeding and creating a commercial market for the fish. In the long term, the plan calls for agencies to study light and sound barriers to complement existing electric barriers and the use of better monitoring systems.

Michigan Attorney General Mike Cox says the plan, "full of half-measures and gimmicks," is not enough. "Keeping Asian carp from devastating the Great Lakes \$7 billion fishery requires only one step — immediately closing the locks."

Richard Lanyon, executive director of Chicago's Metropolitan Water Reclamation District, says those calling for lock closure have "overlooked" the fact that they provide flood relief to Chicago and 124 surrounding suburbs.

Cox asked the U.S. Supreme Court in December to reopen a nearly 100-year-old case involving Chicago's diversion of Lake Michigan water. The lawsuit requested immediate closure of two Chicago navigational locks — also used to keep urban flooding at bay during major rain events. The justices denied that request in February, but Michigan has since renewed it after the release of new eDNA testing results.

Rachel Wells



SPECIALITY CROPS Grants available

A grant program offering Illinois organizations, businesses and communities more than \$640,000 could help raise the profile and increase the availability of Illinois' specialty crop offerings.

"In Illinois, it's hard not to notice the corn and the soybean fields, but ... because of the fertile soil and the favorable climate, Illinois is capable of producing a wide variety of specialty crops, and to a large extent, I don't think people recognize that," says Jeff Squibb, communications director for the Illinois Department of Agriculture, which administers the federal program. "But there is a greater awareness today than there was in years past," he says.

Specialty crops, also often called niche crops, include anything grown specifically for human use, such as nuts, berries, lettuce, tomatoes and herbs. Illinois, the nation's top pumpkin producer, is also known for growing such specialty crops as cauliflower, peas and lima beans. The grant doesn't apply to crops such as corn, soybeans, cotton or tobacco, which receive federal subsidies.

In the past, specialty crop grants have gone primarily toward publicizing specialty crop farms and local farmers markets. While the grants have helped bring the number of farmers markets up from 97 in 1999 to nearly 300 today, Squibb says the shift is part of an overall cultural trend.

"People are more aware of where their food comes from, and they are placing

more importance on purchasing fresh, wholesome food products," Squibb says. "The increased number of farmers markets is simply in response to consumer demand."

Diane Handley, an administrative assistant with the Illinois Specialty Growers Association, which represents small- to medium-scale producers, says the industry itself is growing, too. "It is a labor intensive way to make a living, but you can make a good living with it if you put in a lot of hard work. And a lot of people are wanting to get back to the farm. ... Everything is fresh and local now. [Those are] kind of the buzz words."

The organization regularly receives a grant to help fund its annual conference geared toward fruit, vegetable, herb and organic producers, farmers market organizers and agritourism representatives. Conference visitors share tips, learn about new trends in the industry and visit with vendors. Handley says the event contin-

ues to grow each year and now attracts more than 500 Illinois and out-of-state producers and other agricultural professionals.

While the grant program is still available for marketing and nutrition education efforts, it has been expanded to include research, development and improved distribution of organic crops.

"Essentially, now they're looking to target these monies for projects that make the entire specialty crop industry more competitive," Squibb says. "Being able to grow the crop is one issue, then actually getting it to market is another issue."

Squibb says consumers want the crops Illinois can offer, but the industry can't meet their demands because of inefficient distribution systems.

"We're working on those issues. ... As we develop new distribution channels, then people become more aware that those [specialty crop] products are made here."

Rachel Wells



More women find jobs in agribusiness

The number of farms in Illinois is declining, but the number of women operating farms is growing. The 2009 Census of Agriculture showed that one of every 10 farms is run by a woman.

But modern agriculture offers many more choices to young women today than it did to their grandmothers. Before June 1969, women could not participate in FFA contests or leadership. Today, more than 5,700 of 17,000 members in the Illinois chapter of the National FFA Organization are female.

Beyond the farm, agribusiness in Illinois is a multibillion-dollar industry, requiring expertise in many areas.

Women Changing the Face of Agriculture is a conference with the focus on careers in agriculture for women. Sponsored by Illinois Agri-Women, it meets in Bloomington on April 16 and aims to provide high-school and college women the opportunity to interact with professionals who have careers in agribusiness.

"We are trying to expose our ag daughters to various fields of work, careers where women are serving as employees or are self-employed," says Penny Lauritzen, president of Illinois Agri-Women. The goal, she says, is to give young women a look at what career paths are open to them, "more diversity than they see growing up in small rural communities."

The conference expects to have 100 agribusiness career women presenting, and it will feature several areas for participants to explore: animal and crop sciences; engineering, mechanics and technology; horticulture and forestry; specialty agriculture services; and agribusiness communications and public relations.

"One of the problems in the agricultural industry as a whole is perception," says Amy Brammer, business development manager for Topflight Grain, a farmer-owned cooperative in east-central

"Blessed" plant may help cows fend off grass toxins

William Shakespeare recommends taking "holy thistle" in his play, *Much Ado About Nothing*. Margaret says to Beatrice, "Get you some of this distilled carduus benedictus, and lay it to your heart, it is the only thing for a qualm." A qualm to Shakespeare's audience meant a sudden feeling of nausea or fainting.

For centuries, the herbal remedy, also called Saint Benedict's thistle and spotted carduus, among other folklore names, was considered close to a cure-all, even prescribed for treating the plague from the time of Charlemagne to the advent of antibiotics.

Commonly called blessed thistle today, *Cnicus benedictus* is a Mediterranean plant in the daisy family that may give comfort to cows. Munching on tall fescue grass in pastures, cows can ingest a fungus that helps the grass tolerate drought and insects but is toxic to most hooved animals.

Jamie Douglas, a graduate student in animal science at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, tests the theory that the ancient herbal remedy will counteract the effects of the toxin in meat-producing cows.

"As the toxins build up, the animals' blood vessels constrict and circulation slows. Blood doesn't reach their extremities, and sometimes their hooves, ears and tails will slough off," says Douglas.

The fungus can also affect reproduction by altering a cow's hormones. "They cycle more irregularly, resulting in lower conception rates." The birth rate of calves drops, and the mothers have lactation problems, Douglas says.

Horses and other animals not used for meat can take drugs to fight the fungus.

"That doesn't apply to beef cattle. The Food and Drug Administration has strict regulations about giving medications to animals used for meat. The drug used for horses can't be given to cows," she says.

Dan Faulkner, professor of animal sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, says the fungus causes a substantial cost to the industry. Of the approximately 300,000 beef cows in the state, about half pasture in tall fescue, which grows primarily in southern Illinois. Faulkner estimates the fungus



With fellow graduate student S. Ryan Orrick holding its halter, Jamie Douglas takes a blood sample from one of the cows she's studying at the Southern Illinois University Carbondale Beef Center.

costs farmers in that part of the state \$40 to \$50 a cow. "There are no real numbers, but the cost of fixing the problems is probably closer to \$1 million a year," he says.

So far in her research, Douglas has found in a laboratory experiment that bovine oocytes — a cow's immature eggs — will develop normally when exposed to both the fungus and blessed thistle, whereas oocytes exposed just to the fungus do not.

The next step is to try the experiment in animals at the university's Beef Center. "What works in the lab may not work in the field. We don't know what will happen in the rumen."

The rumen is the stomach chamber in which newly swallowed plant food is stored and processed. The ongoing study assesses whether the herbal remedy will work once it passes through the cow's digestive system. Douglas feeds one group of cows a normal diet, another a diet with the toxin and another with both the toxin and blessed thistle.

She expects to have some results this summer.

Beverley Scobell

Illinois and one of the sponsors of the conference. She says most people think of "cows and plows" when they hear about agriculture careers.

But, she says, there is much more out there for young women. "The science and technology that's in the ag industry is always expanding."

Colleen Callahan, who lives on a farm in Kickapoo, agrees. With a career in agricultural communications spanning the past four decades, she has witnessed the changes in the industry and the changing opportunities for women. "In the 1990s, we began to talk about biotech. Now that is a core part of ag science."

Once young women know their options, Brammer says, they can go into such fields as agricultural economics or agribusiness, "some form of agriculture, and still be in a highly motivated, exciting career."

Callahan, who lost an 18th Congressional District race in 2008 and now works with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in rural development, says she would like to see more women consider public service with agricultural government agencies. "They can choose a career path that will impact agriculture and, ultimately, society because agriculture feeds the world."

Lauritzen says the conference organizers expect that about 500 young women will attend the inaugural event. The cost is \$5, including lunch. "We didn't want to prohibit anyone from participating," she says, and her group is already planning for the conference to be an annual event.

"Our hope is that they will meet a role model, someone who will stay in touch by phone or e-mail and be a mentor. It should be an eye-opening experience for all of us."

Beverley Scobell

U.S. Mint makes new penny for 2010

Nearly 2,500 people crowded into the rotunda of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum for the release of the new 2010 Lincoln “Preservation of the Union” one-cent coin.

Elizabeth Wooley, WICS-TV news anchor, served as master of ceremonies, and U.S. Mint Director Edmund Moy was the keynote speaker at the event held on February 11, just one day before the anniversary of Lincoln’s 201st birthday.

The coin features Victor David Brenner’s image of President Lincoln that has appeared on the penny since 1909. The “tails” image of the penny, designed by Lyndall Bass, features a Union shield with a scroll over it reading “E PLURIBUS UNUM.” The 13 vertical stripes on the shield represent the 13 states joined in one compact union to support the federal government. “This one-cent coin honors the preservation of the union, which was Abraham Lincoln’s ultimate achievement. Because of his presidency, despite bitter regional enmity and a horrific civil war, we remained the United States of America,” Moy said at the event.

After the ceremony, Moy handed out the pennies to children 18 and younger. Adults could exchange currency for the coins.

Springfield resident and Lincoln enthusiast Jim Cox attended the event. “There’s just an atmosphere, a feeling in the crowd that something new is about to happen,” he says of the ceremony. Cox has been collecting coins for nearly 40 years. After obtaining 30 rolls of pennies, Cox took them to the post office and had a cancellation stamp placed on each of the rolls to commemorate the event. “Lincoln was our president during the nation’s worst crisis. This penny is a tribute to his legacy.”

The first penny with President Lincoln’s image appeared in 1909 to celebrate the centennial of his birth. Known as the



wheat penny, the reverse side features stalks of wheat. In 1959, to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Lincoln’s birth, the penny was redesigned, this time featuring an image of the Lincoln Memorial. To celebrate Lincoln’s bicentennial, the U.S. Mint introduced four new pennies that feature different phases in Lincoln’s life on the tail image. Those pennies were released last year (see *Illinois Issues*, October 2009, page 13). The 2010 Preservation of the Union Penny will be produced indefinitely.

Melissa Weissert

BOOK REVIEW: A history of urban planning

Chicagoans marked a century of city and regional planning in 2009 with celebrations of the *Plan of Chicago*, Daniel Burnham and William Bennett’s 1909 vision of urban growth. Joseph P. Schwietzman and Alan P. Mammoser gathered stories of the people involved in various planning transformations over that 100 years in their book, *Beyond Burnham: An Illustrated History of Planning for the Chicago Region* (Lake Forest College Press, 2009).

“We tell this story through the experiences of people — the generations of professional and citizen planners coming after Burnham and Bennett — who believed that change could be achieved through the creation of great plans,” the authors say in the introduction.

“Readers will see that conflict is a major part of our story. Big plans collide with fierce political opposition, as strong-willed citizens confront official planning organizations.”

The book follows regional planning chronologically. The early chapters show the progress from the first years of the *Plan* up to the spread of the interstate highway system and the growing population in the suburbs in the mid-1950s.

The next six chapters follow planning efforts from the late ’50s to the early 2000s, when state-sponsored public agencies such as Illinois State Toll Highway Authority and the Regional Transportation Authority took leading roles.

The authors describe the forces in the last decade that brought transportation and land-use planning groups together. The Commercial Club of Chicago, which commissioned the *Plan of Chicago* and helped create the Chicago Plan Commission, joined with the Metropolitan Planning Council to eventually create the nonprofit Chicago Metropolis 2020. The Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission and the Chicago Area Transportation Study merged to form the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning.

Less encumbered by politics, the authors say, Metropolis 2020 “could move quickly to lay out a contemporary regional plan based on complex modeling, statistical analysis and workshops to solicit public opinion.” The group’s Metropolis Plan envisioned 300 fewer square miles of urbanized land in 2030 than what would be developed if growth patterns continued. “The plan called for revitalizing the historic satellite cities and retrofitting newer suburban office centers to support transit, including the so-called ‘edge cities’ of suburban office development.”

The last chapter looks at what the authors call “the vexing political circumstances” surrounding expansion of the region’s airports. “The chapter provides a kind of case study of the ‘realpolitik’ of regional planning and decision-making.”

It is a good summation of the century of planning politics — private, nonprofit and public.

Beverley Scobell

The accidental celebrity

Patti Blagojevich's family and friends rally around her
as her husband's trial looms

by Kristy Kennedy

News trucks with their bright lights clogged the street in front of the Blagojevich home as helicopters flew overhead.

Meanwhile, Patti's brother, Richard Mell, noted that the street outside his bungalow was quiet. No one knew or cared where he lived. The Blagojevich girls — Amy, 12, and Annie, 5 — were coming for dinner to escape the media circus caused by their father's arrest. "I made pot roast," Richard says. "It was a nice warm environment."

Patti walked in with the girls and decided to stay. A little while later, Rod showed up, too. Not his usual "How-ya-doin'-Champ?" self. He looked exhausted, even dazed. No one brought up the arrest. "It was bizarre," Richard says. "We talked about anything but."

Someone must have mentioned the bright lights because the next day, Richard hung blinds in the Blagojevich girls' rooms so they could sleep.

His sister and her family were in serious trouble. Not too long before, Rod had been taken from the house wearing jogging clothes and handcuffs to face numerous allegations. Although she was not charged, Patti was named 19 times in the FBI affidavit. The probe was part of an ongoing investigation called Operation Board Games, a public corruption investigation of pay-to-play schemes.

It didn't look good, Richard thought.

Patti can be heard in wiretapped phone conversations talking over what



Patti Blagojevich trained herself not to smile when she was young because she dislikes her teeth, family members say. The picture above is a publicity shot from I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here.

job opportunities might be had for her and Rod if different people were appointed to President-elect Barack Obama's Senate seat. In another taped call, Patti suggests that if the Tribune Co. wanted to sell the Cubs with help from the state, then the newspaper should fire editorial writers who had been critical of Rod. Although Richard says he rarely heard Patti swear, she's caught on tape saying, "Hold up that f---ing Cubs s---. ... F--- them."

Further, the feds allege Patti received payments through her River Realty Co. for purported real estate brokerage services from Antoin "Tony" Rezko, so he could curry favor with the governor.

Several legal experts and political observers have since told media outlets that Patti Blagojevich's statements on the wiretaps might indicate that she was a co-conspirator in at least some of her husband's alleged crooked dealings.

Even Patti's brother Richard recognizes that perception but says that's not the Patti he knows. "The tapes portray her as an active participant," he says. "She is not like that at all."

With Rod Blagojevich's trial looming, friends and supporters have become scarce for Patti and Rod. The couple was unavailable to be interviewed for this article — Patti because of an exclusive agreement with another publication, while Rod did not respond to interview requests. More than 50 people were contacted for interviews, from childhood friends to those who knew Patti in her role as first lady to those who worked for the governor's office. Few responded, and many declined to be interviewed. "The trial and the events are toxic," says Richard Simpson, head of the political science department for the University of Illinois Chicago. "If one were known as a public official to be friends with Rod, that would not help their career."

However, Patti's closest group of family and friends were eager to talk about her. They say she has been unfairly branded by the media as a Lady Macbeth. "Unless there's a big part of my sister I don't know about, but I don't think so," Richard says. "I talk to her almost every day, and I don't see a big mastermind."

Patti's family — brother, Richard; sister, state Rep. Deborah Mell; and father, Chicago Ald. Dick Mell — is tight. They describe Patti as a loving mother, daughter, wife and sister. Loyal. And they are just as loyal to her, with plans to do whatever Patti needs from attending the trial to helping with the girls. For now, the three siblings keep up with the habit of checking in with each other daily by phone. Richard might have a parenting question. Deb might be going to Costco. Or the three might discuss more serious things, such as whether Patti should go on a reality show.

In their early childhood, the trio shared an apartment bedroom, with bunk beds for the girls (then 5 and 2) and a crib for baby Richard. "Patti was a mother hen," Dick Mell says. His first-born daughter walked her siblings to and from the neighborhood Catholic school, stuck up for them and once saved Richard from drowning.

After moving to a house, Patti and Deb shared a pink and white room well into their teen years. Deb can picture her sister bent over a book. Patti would stay up to read so that Deb could fall asleep with the light on. Later, Patti encouraged Deb to run for the state legislature. "My dad really didn't want me to do it. Patti gave me the confidence for it," Deb says. Her first vote would be the lone one against Rod's impeachment.

Besides being a caretaker, Patti also was a get-things-done girl. On Christmas morning, toys needing assembly would surround her. More than once when her father puzzled over leftover pieces, Patti methodically went through the directions to figure out where they went.

The family took many driving vacations because of Dick and Margaret Mell's vow to visit all 50 states by the time they were 50. Patti developed a sense of adventure from those trips, returning to the Tetons as an adult to climb the middle mountain with Rod and



One of Patti Blagojevich's stunts from I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here was to eat a tarantula.

Dick. Patti investigated climbing Mount Kilimanjaro but abandoned the idea because of the health risks for her dad. "She had a lot of confidence in herself," Dick says.

Although Patti occasionally helped with campaign mailings as a girl, she did not show much interest in politics. Her father thought she might become a doctor. Patti was near the top of her class at the all-girls St. Scholastica Academy high school. She joined the French club and a kazoo band. Her best friend was valedictorian, but she also hung out with the theater crowd. Deb describes Patti as reserved. She didn't like her teeth and trained herself not to smile in public. She was choosy about her friends but developed strong bonds with those she made.

Home life was a little unconventional. When Dick Mell was elected alderman in 1975, Patti's mother took over the family business, R.F. Mell Spring and

Manufacturing Co., which made springs for automobiles. Under Margaret's supervision, the company flourished. "I always called Margie a closet feminist. I think the kids knew she believed in the empowerment of women," Dick Mell says. "She proved it in how she ran the company."

Dick became the family cook. Although the family sat down to eat at 5 p.m. every day, Margaret lingered over her meal while Dick rushed to watch the evening news. One night, a reporter was critical of Dick, and Patti, who rarely cried, burst into tears. "I remember that really bothered me that she cried. Patti puts on a stiff upper lip, but she's very sensitive," Dick says.

In 1983, Patti left home for the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign to major in economics on a legislative scholarship. Her freshman room-

mate and other friends she made that year remained close, standing up in each other's weddings. Patti spent a semester in Italy and came back with a love for skiing and an Italian boyfriend. The relationship fizzled after Patti returned home to work for the family business.

The following spring, in 1988, Patti attended a political fundraiser with her father and met Rod Blagojevich. Patti joked that Rod was the rebound guy. He won her over with a serenade of Elvis songs. Rod became a part of the Mell family, teaching Richard to drive a stick shift and, within six months of meeting Patti, landing on the Chicago city payroll. Patti and Rod married in 1990.

In 1992, at his father-in-law's suggestion, Rod ran for and won his first political office as state representative. Dick Mell would continue to use his influence to help Rod as he sought higher posts. Rod's political star was rising, and by 1996, he won the 5th Congressional District seat and in 2002 was elected Illinois' governor.

During campaigns, Patti knocked on precinct doors and spoke at events, typical for a candidate's wife. When Rod ran for Congress in 1996, he found a supporter in Simpson, who was an alderman with Mell in the 1970s, besides being a political scientist and reformer. Over a lunch with the couple, Simpson agreed to raise funds for the campaign. Even though Patti grew up watching machine politics, she struck Simpson as an independent thinker. "If you met her, you'd think she was a 'lakefront liberal,'" he says. "She thinks more on issues than candidates."

The couple's girls were born while Rod was in office, Amy in 1996 and Annie in 2003. After Amy was born, Patti opened up River Realty to have more flexible hours. "I thought she might become a professional person who had kids," says Vicki Ellis, a college friend who had children about the same time. "I was surprised at how traditional of a mom she is. There has never been a nanny on the scene. It's important for her to spend time with her kids while they are growing up."

Saying they wanted to keep the girls grounded, Rod and Patti decided not to move to Springfield during Rod's tenure as governor. "We're not Rockefellers, so

when Rod's term or terms as governor is over, we have no means to live like this. It would just be an unnatural thing for us to get used to," Patti told the *State Journal-Register* in Springfield.

Being a good mother was important to Patti. In fact, of the half-dozen in-depth interviews she gave as first lady, two were with *Chicago Parent* magazine. Those reports and others reveal Patti as a woman who wasn't shy about breastfeeding in front of a reporter, who handled the family taxes and who didn't mind cooking but hated cleaning up. In most of the interviews, Patti talked about the girls being her priority. Work would not interfere with her ability to take care of Amy and Annie. Patti flirted with day trading but decided it was too much like gambling. Her main job was selling real estate. Annie often was on her hip when she showed property or gave speeches as first lady.

Not long after opening River Realty, Patti began business dealings with developer and fundraiser Tony Rezko, a relationship that would be uncovered by the *Chicago Tribune* in the spring of 2005. That year, the governor's office acknowledged the two had worked together for at least eight years, dating back to 1997. Reporters began digging, looking into property records and comparing notes with happenings in the governor's office. In November 2006, the *Chicago Sun-Times* was the first to uncover that Patti was making money from Rezko at about the same time he sought favors from the governor. Reporters found that Patti had received nearly \$50,000 in a real estate deal involving Rezko in late 2002, while Rod began "giving friends of Rezko seats on influential state boards and began hiring former Rezko employees to upper-level state jobs" about two months later. The newspaper also reported the feds were examining relationships between the Rezko and Blagojevich families.

A spokeswoman for the governor defended Patti, saying she had every right to pursue professional success and that Patti "carefully follows the same rules and standards that guide all real estate brokers."

Meanwhile, Patti was making her mark as first lady. She took up causes

such as highway beautification, a pediatric vision initiative and a reading program for children. She served on a commission charged with evaluating the state's child welfare system and a task force aimed at protecting children from violent video games. Annie, who has several food allergies, inspired a food allergy program for Illinois schools.

Despite those good works, Patti got a reputation for being cold. Even Richard's friends would ask why his sister looked unhappy on television. "Patti has this terrible habit," Deb says, explaining Patti's practice from childhood of not smiling in public. "I'm always telling her to smile."

Because she didn't live in Springfield, Patti didn't hold receptions or attend many events. During Rod's first term as governor, people often would walk right past Patti without anyone recognizing her. "I don't think she had much of a public face, a persona that anyone had much of a handle on," says Kent Redfield, a professor emeritus of political science at the University of Illinois Springfield. "It made the negative stuff more stark. There was nothing to mitigate it."

Besides the troubling media reports about River Realty, family ties between Rod and Dick Mell grew tense during Rod's first term. Bad feelings became public in 2005, and Dick became estranged from the couple. Rod blamed Dick for starting a series of events that ultimately led to the federal investigation and Rod's arrest. It was very painful for the close family, especially because Patti's mother was very ill with a rare brain disorder. Margaret Mell died in 2006.

About a month later at Rod's second inauguration, Richard remembers Patti sought him out and put her head on his shoulder. "We felt really close," Richard says. "My sister doesn't do that normally. She's not a real affectionate person. Patti is a soft, warm, caring person inside this hard shell. People don't get to see it."

Pressure on the Blagojevich family continued to build. Reporters and federal investigators were still looking into Patti's and the governor's dealings. Rod's absence from Springfield was causing

enormous strain on his relationship with legislators, and the *Chicago Tribune's* editorial board recommended the public be allowed to decide whether Rod should be recalled from office.

Patti's River Realty resurfaced in a 2008 *Tribune* story, showing the firm made more than \$700,000 in commissions and other deals dating back to 2000, when Rod started raising money for his gubernatorial campaign. More than three-fourths came from clients with political connections, according to the story.

Also in 2008, Rezko was convicted on 16 felony counts as part of the federal Operation Board Games investigation. None of the charges had to do with River Realty, and none has been filed against Rezko or Patti for their real estate work. However, the current indictment against Rod indicates that federal investigators have looked into whether Patti's company was a way for Rezko and potentially other political insiders to funnel illicit funds to the Blagojevich family.

The indictment describes two real estate commissions totaling about \$54,000 from Rezko to Patti in 2003 and 2004, saying she provided little or no work. From October 2003-May 2004, Rezko also paid Patti \$12,000 a month for purported brokerage services, according to the indictment.

Patti was living in a "pressure cooker," her family says. "All the scrutiny that was going on in their lives," Dick Mell says. "I wasn't talking with them at the time." [He has since reconciled with his daughter but won't discuss his relationship with Rod.] "I knew it was drawing on her, and she was still suffering from the loss of her mother."

Patti decided it was time to leave real estate.

What reportedly happened next is alleged in a section of the federal indictment titled, "The Search for Employment for Rod Blagojevich's Wife." First, in early 2008, Rod hoped Patti could find work on a paid state commission such as the Pollution Control Board. After discovering she was unqualified for that job, and after Patti passed a licensing exam allowing her to sell financial securities, Rod asked for networking meetings between his wife and financial institutions doing business with

On Patti's first day in the jungle last summer, she ate a tarantula. Deb was not surprised. Family and friends were happy to see Patti come off as a plucky, down-to-earth person. For Patti, the show proved a respite.

the state. Two such meetings were set up, but when they weren't fruitful, Rod said he didn't want the institutions to receive any further state business.

Meanwhile, Patti had a short stint as an investment banker for North Star Investment Management after reportedly touting her ability to land state business, according to the *Chicago Tribune*. Then in October 2008, Patti went to work for the Chicago Christian Industrial League, a charity serving the homeless. She requested hours allowing her to be home for homework and bedtime.

"I felt she was the perfect fit," says Judy McIntyre, who was the charity's director. "You don't want to hire someone who is above the mission. She was no prima donna. She rolled up her sleeves and went to work. It was much more than a job to her; it was a calling."

Patti sometimes had lunch with homeless people served by the league and later lobbied Rod to pardon a janitor whom she befriended there. The pardon was one of Rod's last acts as governor. "She has a basic propensity for helping people," McIntyre says.

Rod was arrested in early December 2008 and impeached by late January 2009. The feds released tapes of phone calls with Patti cursing the *Tribune* and participating in discussions on how to leverage Obama's Senate seat. Rod talks about his family's financial struggles and his hopes for Patti to land a job earning in the ballpark of \$150,000. According to income tax statements released during the years Rod was in office, the couple's adjusted gross income ranged

from about \$220,000 in 2007 to about \$375,000 in 2004. The governor's salary ranged from about \$150,000 and \$180,000 during his tenure.

After the arrest and impeachment, Patti was fired from the homeless charity. Her family and close friends rallied, offering support. The family got a dog, Skittles, as a distraction for the girls. Rod hired a publicist, hit the national media circuit, began hosting a radio show and wrote a book. The couple often cites the need to pay the mortgage and the girls' private school tuition to keep some stability for them. But they also are faced with enormous legal bills and the possibility of paying damages if Rod is convicted. The indictment lists their home as an asset.

When the court blocked Rod from going to Costa Rica for *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here*, Patti went on the television reality show instead, saying the family had to make a living. Her inner circle told her she was crazy. "I thought they would portray her as a villain," Richard says.

On Patti's first day in the jungle last summer, she ate a tarantula. Deb was not surprised. Family and friends were happy to see Patti come off as a plucky, down-to-earth person. For Patti, the show proved a respite. Professional wrestler Torrie Wilson, who has stayed in touch, says she found Patti to be genuine. "I really admired that she had such a great attitude despite all the stuff going on at home," Wilson says. Patti also showed a catty side when she described a "kooky old aunt" her husband once ran against. Judy Baar Topinka was offended.

Mostly, Patti won over the public. "Patti is an asset to her husband. A lot of people had a very high opinion of her, fighting for her husband and her family," says Paul Green, director of the Institute of Politics at Roosevelt University in Chicago. "That's the stuff that *Masterpiece Theater* is made of."

In one scene, Patti described the impending court case like a weight. She was concerned the show could aggravate the U.S. attorney and prompt further charges. "You know in about a year, it's coming with the, 'We're going to indict your wife unless you plead guilty.'"

They'll say it," she said.

Her fear is not unfounded, says Matthew Belcher, a Chicago trial attorney. Legal experts say it is unusual for someone to be named so many times in an indictment and not charged. Theories for why she hasn't been charged range from a potential plan for prosecutors to pressure Rod to plead guilty to the idea that a jury could be sympathetic to two parents facing prosecution to the possibility that investigators are still gathering evidence in an effort to prove Patti committed a crime.

If Rezko cooperates with federal investigators and testifies, "the role of Patti in the Blagojevich enterprise will be center stage," Belcher says.

For now, Patti copes by keeping a routine for the girls. They live in a media-free house, and Patti is searching for a job. "I'm blown away by her strength," friend Vicki Ellis says. "I'd love for her to tell the secret for how she keeps it together. She's good at prioritizing what is important and somehow blocking everything else out."

Patti drinks herbal tea and exercises to combat stress and recently climbed a skyscraper in the "Hustle Up the Hancock" event. She also makes sure to keep a thick book handy for escape.

In contrast to her husband, Patti is unlikely to be remembered as a key figure in Illinois politics, political scientist Simpson says. "Illinois is known around the world for [Rod] Blagojevich. It's a little equivalent of people knowing Chicago for Al Capone."

What does the future hold? Will Patti be forever known as the foul-mouthed first lady who ate a tarantula?

No way, Dick Mell says. "That one snippet of three or four seconds is not a lifetime of achievements. She is the epitome of what any parent would want in a child. She is a wonderful person."

Her sister, Deb, says, "I think there is a lot of living for Patti still to do."

And her brother, Richard, is serious when he says, "We joke that they can always move in with us." □

Kristy Kennedy is a Naperville-based free-lance writer.



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Easier said than done

Can Illinois wring savings out of its Medicaid budget?

by Daniel C. Vock

By October, Illinois state officials hope to take a small but significant step in reining in Medicaid costs. By then, they hope to move about 38,000 patients in the Chicago suburbs into HMO-style managed care plans. That group comprises some of the most expensive — and most vulnerable — types of Medicaid enrollees: the elderly, blind and disabled. Together, they cost the state about \$700 million a year, or more than \$18,000 each. By promoting good medical practices and limiting the state's financial risk, the Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services expects to shave Medicaid costs in the next five years by \$200 million.

"This isn't a huge cost-saver in the first year," says Illinois Medicaid administrator Theresa Eagleson, "but in the long run, it ends up saving the state money and giving us healthier patients."

The move is controversial, but it is most likely a sign of things to come. Illinois' political climate, its budget mess and advances in the health industry all make it more likely that the state or its surrogates will take a more hands-on approach to managing the health decisions of its Medicaid enrollees.

"I think there are going to be some major changes made in the Medicaid system in Illinois because of the cost," says state Rep. Patricia Bellock, a Republican who chairs a House committee on Medicaid reform.

The recession, of course, makes the matter more urgent. Not only does the state have less money to pay its bills, more people are qualifying for Medicaid health insurance as they lose their jobs. So even though the state has made several high-profile expansions in eligibility — including the All Kids program in 2006 — Eagleson says 80 percent of the children enrolled since the passage of All Kids would have been covered under the programs in place before the expansion.

Medicaid presents itself as an especially attractive target for budget cutters. The health insurance program is right smack at the center of debates about the appropriate mix of public oversight and private innovation in providing health care. The fact that the state largely runs the program, subject to federal rules, means state officials are in a position to make

even seemingly minor tweaks that could reap big dividends for the state budget.

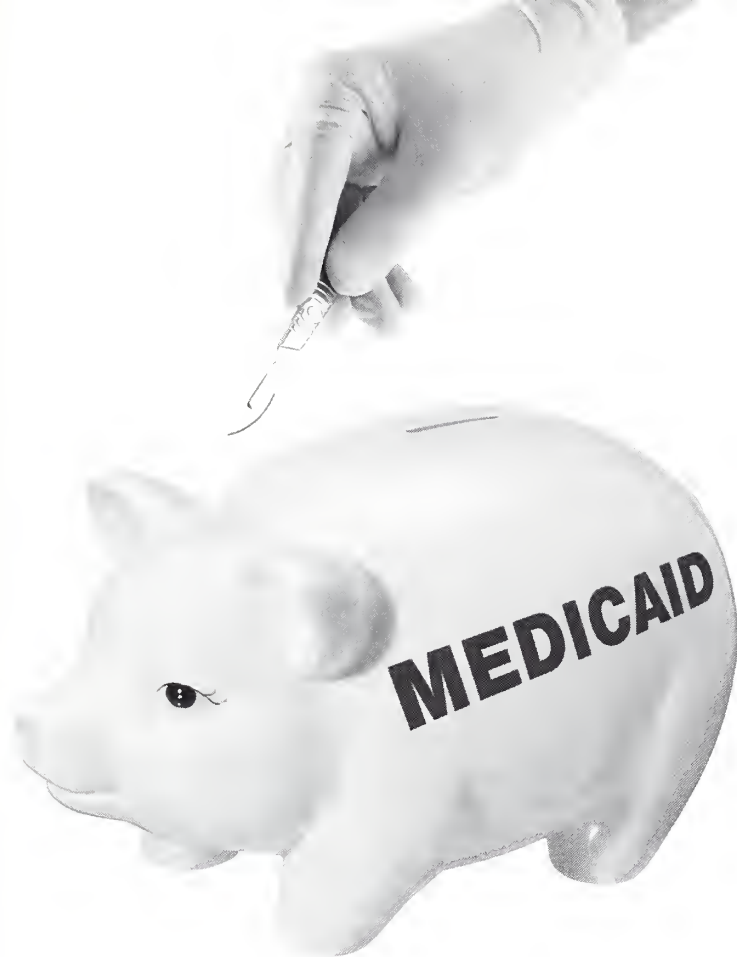
Indeed, most serious proposals of how to right Illinois' listing fiscal ship include changes to the program that insures 2.5 million lower-income Illinoisans at a cost of \$13.7 billion a year. But clamping down on Medicaid costs can be maddeningly difficult politically, financially and practically.

That's not to say there aren't ways to save money, just that seemingly simple solutions have big drawbacks.

The most straightforward cost-saving measure, for example, would be to change the rules so fewer people could get Medicaid coverage. Besides the political problem of kicking people off their health insurance in the middle of a recession, the move would jeopardize \$3 billion in extra money the state is receiving under the federal stimulus package. Likewise, if the state cuts the rates it pays to doctors and hospitals, fewer providers will see Medicaid patients, and those remaining providers will struggle financially because of the low rates. If too few providers participate, Medicaid enrollees can sue the state for not living up to its duties under federal law, such as what happened to Illinois in 2004.

Federal matching funds also skew budget-cutting arithmetic in Springfield. Medicaid, the nation's largest health insurer, covers some 60 million Americans, more than even Medicare for seniors, and is operated as a partnership between states and the federal government. Normally, Illinois foots the bill for about half of its Medicaid costs; the feds pick up the rest. But thanks to last year's federal stimulus package, the federal government now pays 62 cents out of every Medicaid dollar. As always, there's no limit on how much the feds will pay, as long as the state picks up its share. So now, Illinois officials would have to slash Medicaid spending by more than \$2.60 for every \$1 of state money they hope to save.

One of the most widely touted ideas to restrain Medicaid costs is to use more HMO-style managed care to ensure that patients use only the services they need. That proposal gets a lot of traction because Illinois uses far less private managed care than



most states. Republican lawmakers especially have touted the approach in budget negotiations, and GOP candidates, including the party's nominee for governor, Sen. Bill Brady, included it in their platforms. In February 2009, the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago called for using managed care for all of Illinois' nondisabled, nonelderly adults receiving Medicaid.

The Taxpayer Action Board, a task force convened by Gov. Pat Quinn last year, estimated that more aggressive care management could save nearly \$2.2 billion in the first five years, a far higher estimate than the state provided. In the fifth year of the rollout, for example, the task force said the changes would result in \$855 million; the state pegged the number at \$310 million.

Either way, Quinn's administration is already increasing its use of managed care (although state officials prefer the term "coordinated care"). Roughly 1.7 million of the state's Medicaid enrollees — the vast majority of participants — now use a system called Illinois Health Connect, in which their primary doctors coordinate their care with other providers. The state also has ramped up its efforts to use disease management through a program called Your Healthcare Plus, which improves patients' health and decreases state costs by making sure, for example, that patients with heart problems keep taking their medicine and visiting their doctors. Now, 220,000 Illinoisans are enrolled, resulting in \$104 million of savings in 2008. The state also has long allowed patients to sign up for HMO-style coverage, although only a fraction of them actually do (accounting for 2.5 percent of Medicaid expenditures). And now, of course, the state is moving ahead with the suburban pilot program.

But Bellock, the Republican legislator from Hinsdale, questions the administration's approach. She says state government should build on its current programs rather than launch an ambitious new pilot program. Patients who use Illinois Health Connect should have to stick with their doctors for a year to prevent them from "shopping" for a physician who will authorize unnecessary treatments. The state also could make disease management mandatory for patients with certain conditions and expand its private managed care efforts to families, she says. Quinn's Taxpayer Advisory Board also suggested paying doctors based on patient outcomes, rather than just a flat fee per patient.

Just how effective managed care can be in holding down costs is, of course, a matter of debate. Part of the reason decreasing Medicaid costs in Illinois is so difficult is because Illinois' per-patient costs are already among the lowest in the country.

The state's average bill of \$4,129 per Medicaid enrollee means Illinois had the 10th-lowest average cost of any state or the District of Columbia. And it's not just that Illinois handles one type of patient particularly well, driving down the average. Illinois has one of the 10 lowest average costs among states for children, the elderly and other adults. Its costs for insuring the disabled are relatively high in comparison but are still about average among states. On top of that, state officials say Illinois comes out near the top of states in the deals it gets with drug makers for the medicines it buys, again holding down costs in one area where Medicaid's bills have grown most.

One of the ways Illinois limits costs is by paying less to medical providers than the vast majority of states. It only pays doctors, for instance, about 90 percent of the national average. By using a managed care organization, the state would not pay providers directly. Instead, the state would pay the managed care organization a set amount per patient, and then that organization would determine how much to pay its providers. But because Illinois is already paying its physicians and other providers so little, it's hard to imagine how a managed care organization could squeeze providers any more. In fact, Eagleson, the state Medicaid director, testified in March 2009 that for children and parents, the state pays HMOs more per patient than it costs the state to take care of them itself.

But because insuring children and their parents is relatively inexpensive, states have begun to look at managed care for their most vulnerable enrollees: the elderly, blind and disabled. In fact, 41 states now use some sort of managed care for those populations. Not all of them have relied on the private sector. About a quarter use private organizations, another quarter use state-run programs that give patients a "medical home" with their primary care physicians and half offer a combination.

Medicaid is designed to help some of society's most vulnerable people. Usually, that means recipients must not only be poor, they must also fall into a category of at-need patients: kids, their parents, the elderly, the blind or the disabled. So while Medicaid is a major insurer in its own right, its influence is especially big in certain parts of the health care system — the delivery room and the nursing home. In 2005, Medicaid paid for half of all births in Illinois, including 95 percent of births to teenage

mothers. The program also pays half of the nation's bills for long-term care, such as nursing homes.

The most expensive patients in Medicaid are also, not surprisingly, the most fragile. It costs Illinois, for example, 10 times as much in a year to pay for coverage for a disabled patient than it does for a child. Even nonelderly adults are relatively cheap — less than \$2,000 a year — compared with senior citizens (\$11,560) or the disabled (\$16,613). Children make up 59 percent of Illinois' Medicaid rolls but account for only 28 percent of the program's costs.

That's a big reason why the Medicaid agency is going ahead with the pilot program focused on the elderly, blind and disabled.

The agency is looking for two insurers to provide HMO-style coverage without the big drawbacks of HMOs. Often, managed care organizations save money by limiting access to services, but the state hopes to encourage the insurers to promote smarter uses of services instead. So, for example, the state will give bonuses to the carriers based on how many of their patients who end up in the hospital visit their primary care physician within two weeks of leaving the hospital. Other incentives would promote mental health screenings and diabetes management. Roughly 6 percent of the potential reimbursement for the carriers would come in the form of such bonuses.

But Democratic and Republican lawmakers alike have serious concerns about the experiment. They say the state doesn't have the expertise to try such an ambitious project, especially because Illinois rarely uses HMOs for patients whose care is easier to manage. "Why would we as a state that has done hardly any managed care take on a project that other states that do have managed care haven't taken on?" Bellock asks.

The pilot program "is driven by budgetary pressures to save money without taking into account the human toll it will have," Rep. Esther Golar, a Chicago Democrat, said in a statement. "We are concerned whether individuals will have the ability to continue services with their current providers because continuity of care is important."

Golar is one of several sponsors of a measure designed to slow the pilot project. The legislation would create a task force charged with studying managed care for aged, blind and disabled patients. The proposal essentially would put the brakes on the pilot program, at least until the task force gave its approval.

Hospitals are wary of the trial, too. If the managed care organizations don't develop adequate networks of providers, hospitals could end up holding the bag, says Howard Peters, senior vice president of the Illinois Hospital Association. If patients can't find a doctor in their network, they will head to the nearest hospital for treatment instead. And then it will be up to the hospitals to haggle with the managed care organization over whether they can get paid, Peters says.

Peters says the state should strengthen its own managed-care efforts rather than relying on outside providers. If a private HMO figures out how to squeeze savings out of the Medicaid program, those savings stay within the company as profit. But if state government can save money, that money goes back to the state, which can use it to pay for other services, he says.



A handful of high-profile failures mar Illinois' history of using managed care companies in Medicaid. Just two years ago, Illinois and federal prosecutors reached a record \$225 million settlement for health care fraud in a case they brought against Virginia-based Amerigroup. The government argued that Amerigroup intentionally blocked pregnant women and other at-risk patients from signing up for its Medicaid managed care program. Amerigroup settled the case after a trial court entered a \$334 million award against the carrier, which far eclipsed the \$243 million the company received for providing Illinois Medicaid services from 2000 to 2004.

Barbara Otto, executive director of the Chicago-based Health and Disability Advocates, says she hopes the pilot project will provide a new model for medical providers in Illinois. "It's really hard to design different models of service delivery when you're basically held captive by fee-for-service," she says. Under the current fee-for-service arrangement, providers have little incentive to develop community-based services rather than nursing homes because Medicaid pays more for nursing home stays, she says.

But for the project to succeed, Otto stresses, state officials must focus on transparency and communication. Patients need to know what changes are in store and why. They should also have access to a "strong appeals process" in case the managed care organization prevents patients from getting the treatments they want, Otto says.

Even if the state moves forward with the pilot program — or the more ambitious managed care plans floated by budget experts — the savings to the state will be slow coming in. The most optimistic projections say it will take about three years for the benefits to really become apparent. That's bad news for lawmakers trying to balance the budget this year.

Rep. Frank Mautino, a Spring Valley Democrat who worked on Medicaid issues, says he once thought Illinois could quickly and easily save \$1 billion annually in Medicaid costs. "Anyone who tells you they're going to save you \$1 billion is not familiar with how Medicaid really works," he now says. "It looks good, and it's a great headline to say I can save you a billion dollars tomorrow. You can't." □

Daniel C. Vock is a reporter for Stateline.org in Washington, D.C.

Video poker

The controversial funding source could prove to be a shaky foundation for the state's capital plan

by Jamey Dunn

Last May, the Illinois General Assembly passed the state's first capital construction program in 10 years. The National Conference of State Legislators called it the most comprehensive state-level job-creation plan in the country, and according to Gov. Pat Quinn, the program will generate 439,000 jobs in the next six years. To help pay for the \$31 billion package, legislators voted to legalize video poker machines in thousands of bars, restaurants and truck stops throughout the state.

"This is a crucial economic recovery initiative that will generate what's needed most in Illinois: jobs, jobs, jobs," Quinn said when he signed the bill. "Illinois Jobs Now! provides many long-awaited improvements to our bridges and roads, transportation networks, schools and communities."

However, the controversial funding source could prove to be a shaky foundation for the capital plan. The law lets local governments decide whether they want to allow video poker in their communities, and those that do will get a cut of the money raised.

But with more than 60 municipalities opting out — including the possibility of Chicago — and a Republican candidate for governor pledging to repeal the Video Gaming Act if elected, some legislators now say they may have to go back to the drawing board to find money for the construction program.

When the Video Gaming Act was passed, the anti-gambling backlash was almost immediate. Groups such as Illinois Church Action on Alcohol and Addiction Problems mobilized to help communities keep video gambling out.

"We started sending letters to mayors and all the county board chairmen in Illinois," says Anita Bedell, executive director of ILCAAP, which is the state's most-visible anti-gambling organization.

Bedell says legislators sold video poker as a voluntary tax because people can choose not to gamble. But she says it is not a voluntary act for gambling addicts. "Someone might choose to play once or twice. Once they get addicted, the choice is gone."

Bedell criticizes members of the General Assembly for passing the bill too quickly and not considering the monetary and intangible costs associated with a large gambling expansion, such as law enforcement, regulation and addiction treatment.

"I just thought they wanted to get something passed. They got an agreement and they went for it. ... There's a lot of things they didn't consider," Bedell says. "It's not based on the reality of gambling and how much money they can actually get out of it."

Proponents of the Video Gaming Act say bars throughout the state are already paying out for video poker

illegally, and the legislation will bring the practice out from under the table. They say it will add regulations to protect gamblers from being cheated by crooked machines, while also bringing in needed revenues for the state.

"That's the one thing that nobody seems to want to talk about. We already have video gaming in Illinois. It's just run by the mob," says Sen. Mike Jacobs, an East Moline Democrat.

Bedell argues the state should enforce the laws against such gambling instead of just legalizing it because it is widespread.

The Illinois Gaming Board plans to unroll video poker across the state by the end of the year. Trying to create uniformity and regulation in what was previously a shadow industry will take some time, says Gene O'Shea, spokesman for the board.

He says the three biggest challenges for the Gaming Board are hiring enough staff to implement the program, writing a standard set of regulations for all participants to abide by and creating a statewide computer reporting system to monitor machines for fraud. Establishments that want to participate will have to obtain board approval for the machines, which will be linked into a computer system so the board can track such statistics as wins and losses.

Legislators looking for capital projects to create jobs in their areas want to see the process move more quickly. "I was a little frustrated by the pace of the rollout of the

capital bill and the video poker,” Jacobs says. “I am somewhat critical of the Gaming Board that they haven’t rolled this out.”

Another funding component for the capital projects must be sanctioned by the U.S. Department of Justice. Illinois has asked for approval of a pilot program to sell lottery tickets online under the supervision of a private management firm. When the funding legislation was passed, Quinn’s Office of Management and Budget estimated online lottery sales and video poker revenues would generate about \$525 million.

“Of course, obviously, it’s going to be a little less than we anticipated,” Kelly Kraft, a spokeswoman for Quinn’s Office of Management and Budget, says in response to many local governments choosing not to have video poker.

Quinn’s office sent a letter in December asking the Department of Justice to review the plan to sell lottery tickets online. The legislation calls for tickets to be sold within the state but also provides for expanding sales outside Illinois if the federal agency approves.

Tracy Owens, a spokesman for the Illinois Lottery, says the department is still vetting the plan. “It’s kind of a waiting game. You wait until the [Department of Justice] chooses to respond.”

Some legislators say the uncertainty surrounding video poker and the online lottery program could seriously damage the capital plan.

“I was concerned that the whole capital bill could fail as a result of the way that this bill was so poorly drafted,” says Rep. Jack Franks, a Marengo Democrat. “It was recklessly done, it was foolishly done and not well-thought-out.”

Franks says he worries that court cases challenging the legality of video poker and Internet lottery sales may sink both options as funding sources.

In the meantime, communities are left with the choice of allowing video poker at local bars and restaurants.

The Rockford City Council considered banning video poker but decided against it. Democratic Ald. Ann Thompson-Kelly says, in the end, she thought her city needed the tourism dollars that video poker could draw. She says she considered the problem of gambling addiction and the opinions of local clergy, but that ultimately it was not a difficult decision.

“That’s the one thing that nobody seems to want to talk about. We already have video gaming in Illinois. It’s just run by the mob.”

**— Sen. Mike Jacobs,
East Moline Democrat**

“We looked at how many dollars are leaving this community every day. ... We have buses leaving Rockford every day ... going to places that have the machines,” she says. “When you are marketing your area, you need as many attractions as possible.”

Thompson-Kelly says she thinks many northern Illinois communities rejected video poker because of concerns that it might cut into revenues from area casinos. “If I was 10 blocks from a casino, and I benefited from the revenue of that casino, I’d opt out, too.”

Community leaders from local governments that have decided not to participate in video gaming say their choice was based on the values of their residents, not financial interests.

“Members of the [DuPage] County Board and the county board chairman just had a visceral reaction to the idea of having a little casino on every corner in DuPage County,” says Brien Sheahan, a DuPage County Board member who introduced the measure that barred video poker from that county. “The reaction from ordinary DuPage citizens has been overwhelmingly in favor of opting out.”

DuPage County was the first municipality to vote down video gaming after the capital bill passed.

Sheahan says he hopes the move his county made will encourage others to follow suit. “By being first, we received extensive media coverage, which was important in terms of creating momentum

and encouraging other counties and municipalities to ban video poker. The board and chairman were very cognizant of the important symbolic value of the second largest county in Illinois being the first to opt out.”

However, some lawmakers are now reconsidering giving local governments, such as DuPage County, such a choice without repercussions. They say if communities want capital projects and the jobs that come with them, they should have to participate in the program that is helping to fund the projects.

“I noticed that people have no problem taking state money for their local projects but that some people don’t want to pay,” Jacobs says. “If you don’t have the video gaming money, you don’t have a capital bill.”

Jacobs introduced **Senate Bill 2816**, which would stop construction projects from going to areas that decide against video poker. “My community has been supportive. They feel that if you are going to take, you’ve got to give.”

Bedell says bills such as Jacobs’ place unfair pressure on local governments to allow video poker. She says some community leaders are waiting to see what the legislature does before they make their decisions.

“The law did not contain a penalty for counties and municipalities that opted out, and it would be unfair at this point to go back and change that provision,” Sheahan says.

Sen. Terry Link, a Waukegan Democrat and chairman of the Senate Gaming Committee, says legislators may have to come up with a new funding source for the capital bill because large counties such as DuPage, Kane and Lake are opting out of video poker. He says if Chicago does not participate, new funding would likely become a necessity. “I think that’s when you really have to seriously look at an alternative.”

If a municipality already has a ban on gambling, it must be lifted before local establishments could offer legal video poker. Chicago has such a ban, and Mayor Richard Daley has made statements indicating the City Council is not considering repealing it at present. The legislature’s Commission on Government Forecasting and Accountability estimates



that revenues generated from video poker could drop by between \$95 million and \$177 million if Chicago does not participate.

Link suggests expanding existing gaming in Illinois, such as casino and riverboat gambling, and including video poker machines at racetracks. He says such expansions would be “acceptable to members of both sides of the aisles of both houses. ... It would not be construed as bringing [gambling] into neighborhoods. It would be a bill that could alleviate a lot of the tensions they have in each of these communities because [it] wouldn’t be bringing [gambling] into the taverns or restaurants.”

But Senate President John Cullerton, a Chicago Democrat, disagrees that any new revenue will be needed. Rikeesha Phelon, the spokeswoman for Cullerton, says when revenue projections for the capital plan were made, the fact that some communities would opt out was factored into the equation. Cullerton also does not support any proposal to pull

projects from communities that decide not to allow video poker.

The results of the general election next November could also have a major impact on video poker. Sen. Bill Brady from Bloomington, the Republican candidate for governor, opposes gambling expansion and says he would move to end the legalization of video poker if he is elected to the state’s top office. Brady says if bars, restaurants and truck stops already have legal machines, he would not try to take them away, but he plans to stop the practice from spreading to new establishments.

“Obviously [any machine owners] who made an investment should be grandfathered in, but we should cease the expansion of it,” Brady says. “It’s a false sense of revenue. I don’t think it’s proper in terms of the direction the state needs to head. ... I believe the best thing to do is eliminate it.”

A large chunk of the revenue for the capital plans does come from more traditional and predictable sources.

Removing a sales tax exemption on soft drinks, candy and some hygiene products is expected to bring in about \$150 million. A tax increase on alcohol will generate about \$113 million a year. Hikes in driving-related fees, such as for licensing and registering vehicles, will raise more than \$330 million a year. In total, the state will contribute about \$11.5 billion to capital projects, which will leverage federal and local funds.

“[Video poker] is only a portion of the capital bill, and I think everybody is thinking that this is the full funding ... but it’s not,” Link says.

While the future of some revenue streams for Illinois Jobs Now! is uncertain, projects are moving ahead. Illinois will have sold more than \$2 billion in bonds for capital construction by the end of the month, according to John Sinsheimer, the state director of capital markets.

Sinsheimer says, “That is cash in the bank for construction projects — roads, bridges, sewers, schools, you name it.” □

Hungry in Illinois

State government tries to keep up with demand for food stamps during historic economic slump

by Mike Ramsey

Suppose the feds turned on the cash spigot, but states couldn't distribute money fast enough to the needy — or to everyone who was entitled. That's where Illinois government has found itself in recent months while scrambling to meet record demand for food stamp benefits amid the lingering recession.

"As our numbers have gone up, we are leaning increasingly on technology to help us out," says Michelle Saddler, secretary of the Illinois Department of Human Services. "At the same time that the economy has hit a downturn, the state is experiencing this terrible budget crisis, and consequently, we haven't been able to keep our staffing levels where we need them."

Through attrition, the department has lost more than 200 caseworkers since 2007, when 2,260 employees handled nearly 600,000 food stamp households. Currently, about 2,100 workers manage a collective caseload of more than 761,000 households, the agency says. About 1.6 million Illinoisans — more than 12 percent of the population — are obtaining a major share of their groceries with the help of the federal food stamp program, which today is known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

From January 2009 to January 2010, the number of households receiving food stamps rose 15 percent, DHS says. During that same period, applications for SNAP climbed 32 percent.

Nationally, too, the numbers have exploded. In November 2009, more than 38 million low-income people were collecting SNAP benefits, an increase of

22 percent from November 2008, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which pays the benefits and shares administrative costs with states. Unfortunately,

the state partners have not been keeping up with the surge, one advocate for recipients says. "The theme is the same [nationally]: People are experiencing not-so-stellar

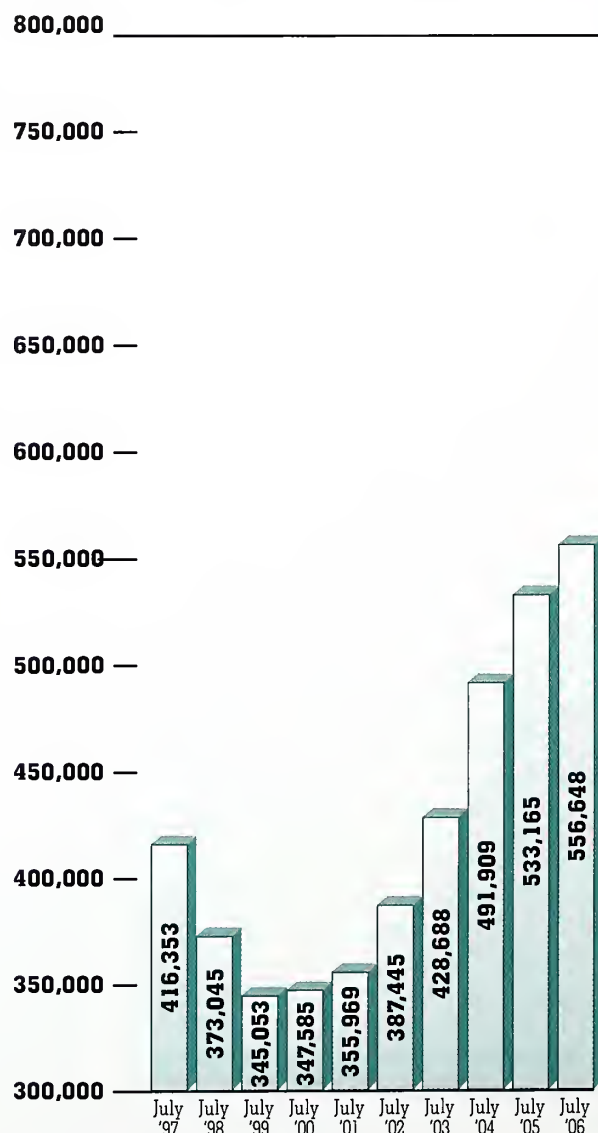
Illinois Department of Human Services

Food stamp households statewide

July 1997 - November 2009

FS Households

WELFARE-TO-WORK
OUTCOMES &
PERFORMANCE
MANAGEMENT
Prepared by:
Bureau of
Research & Analysis



customer service because caseworkers are overworked,” says Melissa Cundari, a regional SNAP outreach manager for the hunger-relief charity Feeding America. “I mean, there are some caseworkers in Chicago with over 2,000 people in their caseload. That’s just really unmanageable. They are doing the best they can with what they have to work with, which is not much.”

Saddler acknowledges DHS has experienced some problems in processing applications and in keeping established accounts filled with SNAP benefits. But she says that will improve as the state uses \$17 million in federal stimulus cash to hire new caseworkers. The additional agency employees will be dedicated solely to the food stamp program, which paid Illinois recipients a total of \$2.3 billion in federal fiscal 2009. “The state really has all hands on deck,” Saddler says.

SNAP benefits are considered the most

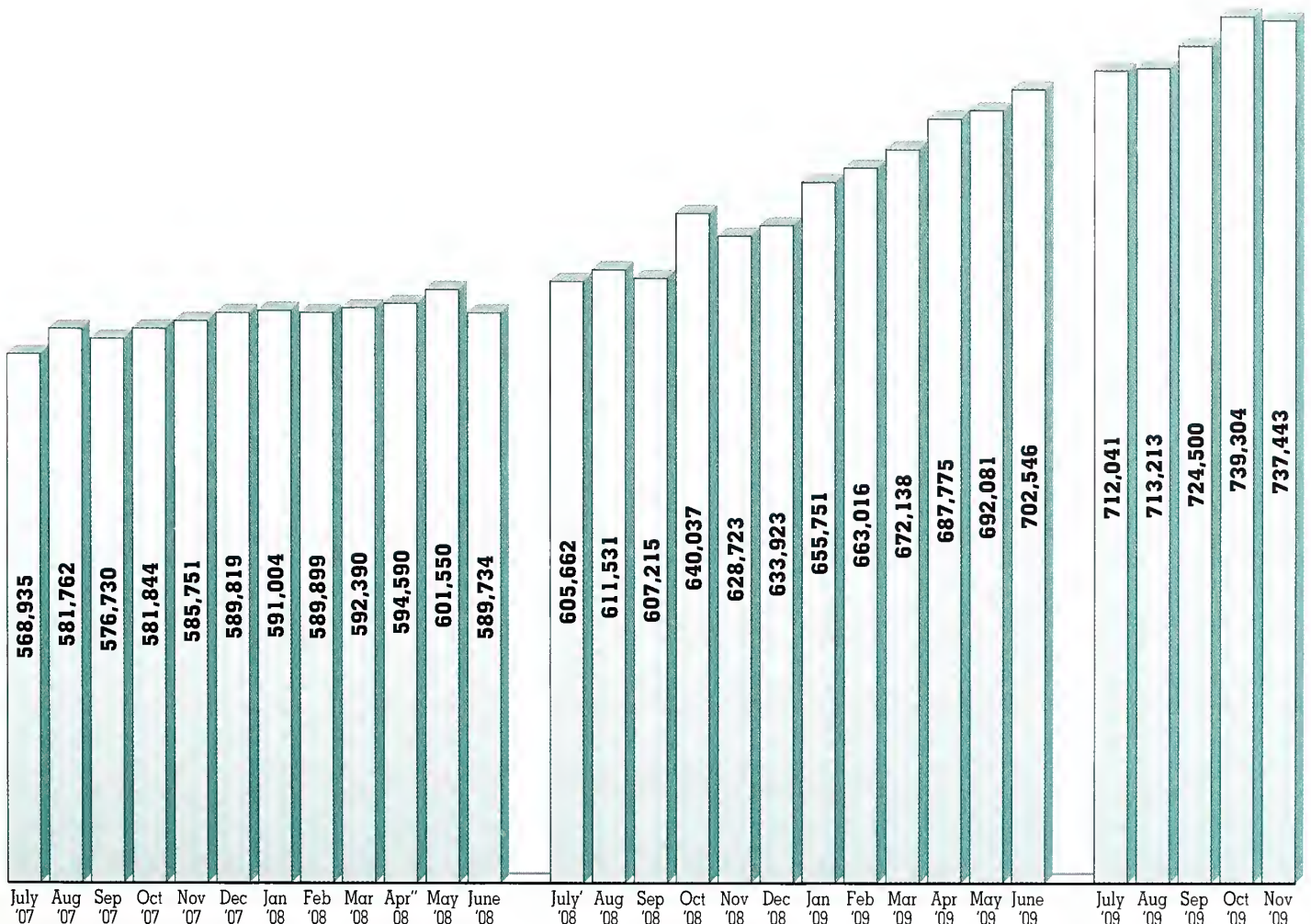
accessible type of government assistance in the wake of the massive welfare cut-backs of the 1990s. Not surprisingly, a growing number of formerly middle-class people are relying on them. But the food stamp benefits are no great windfall, at least for individual households. Single recipients in Illinois can receive a maximum of \$200 a month (or about \$50 a week), while a household of five can expect no more than \$793 (about \$40 each per week). SNAP benefits can be used at most grocery stores for unprepared food items (not precooked dinners), and recipients cannot use them to buy alcohol or tobacco products.

To get the relatively modest sums, recipients must be particularly down on their luck. In Illinois, for example, a recipient’s income cannot exceed \$2,400 a month for a family of four. Generally, recipients are members of the working poor and don’t receive any other kind of

cash aid. Many SNAP beneficiaries are children or seniors, the USDA’s Food & Nutrition Service says.

Some states, like Illinois, have also imposed restrictions on applicants with cash savings. But Illinois was in the process of abolishing a requirement that recipients not have more than \$2,000 in liquid assets on hand to qualify for SNAP benefits. “We want people to have assets, and you don’t want to make people spend themselves deeper into poverty,” Saddler says. “It’s counter-intuitive to what we are striving for in terms of self-sufficiency for people.”

Compared with other states, Illinois at least gets high marks for its SNAP “participation rate,” which gauges how well a government reaches its eligible population. Eighty-three percent of eligible Illinoisans are signed up and receiving the benefits, compared with the national average of 66 percent, Cundari says. Wyoming



and California ranked last among states in 2007, with participation rates of 47 percent and 48 percent, respectively, according to the USDA.

In Illinois, as many as 400,000 eligible people are not enrolled, the Department of Human Services estimates. The reasons vary. There is still some stigma attached to food stamps, though the benefits today are conveyed through less-conspicuous debit cards, not the perforated paper stamps that once created logjams and prompted withering glances at the checkout counter. (The card system, which requires personal identification numbers from users, is also designed to reduce fraud.)

Other reasons for the gap in participation: Some members of the working poor may not think they meet the income guidelines, or they may not have the time to make the required weekday visit to a busy Department of Human Services field office. Also, some potential recipients may not have Internet access to the department's Web site, which offers information and an opportunity to preregister. On another front, immigrant populations who may be eligible for food stamps are fearful about disclosing information to the government.

Saddler says her office has stepped up SNAP recruitment efforts at food banks and in the Chicago school system in an attempt to reach more people. The agency can provide immediate SNAP benefits to people in emergency situations. "Most cases are reviewed within 30 days, but even 30 days is quite a while to wait," she says.

Getting more eligible people into the program is considered desirable by state governments because the food stamp dollars help stimulate the economy by steering customers to grocery outlets, and they encourage the consumption of agricultural products. Every \$5 spent on SNAP purchases generates \$9.20 in local economic activity, according to the USDA.

"In this financial climate, it would be a really dumb idea to leave money in Washington that could be brought here to Illinois," says Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, an assistant professor with the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy Studies.

Food stamps have their origins in a Great Depression-era program through which participants could buy special

colored stamps at a discount to obtain farm commodities. The program waned during the wartime economy but was revived in the 1960s during the War on Poverty. By the late-1970s, recipients no longer had to pay pennies on the dollar to acquire them. The program's image has been rehabilitated in part through the new SNAP moniker, and a recent *New York Times* article indicated there is wider acceptance among elected leaders, who are encouraging the poor to sign up. Although the benefits today are free to qualified households, they are not supposed to cover an entire month's grocery bill.

And indeed, they don't. The number of Americans who received emergency food supplies from the Feeding America network increased nearly 50 percent between 2005 and 2009 — from 25.3 million people to 37 million people — that organization said in a report released earlier this year. About 40 percent of the people whom Feeding America helps are SNAP recipients, and another 40 percent are believed to be eligible for the program but not enrolled, Cundari says.

Other charities that feed hungry Illinoisans also are feeling the squeeze. Elizabeth Donovan, director of agencies and programs for the Northern Illinois Food Bank, says her 13-county network has managed to meet the demand, but not without significant effort. Individual cash donations have shrunk, she says, while increasingly efficient retail outlets have less food to hand over. Food bank drivers are making 100 stops a week, which is double the number from a year ago, Donovan says. "Which means you have more trucks on the road, which means you have to hire another driver," she says. "There's a lot of work to getting food."

Meanwhile, on the front lines, food pantry volunteers are often overwhelmed by the growing number of recipients who need guidance for a variety of social programs. "We've never had numbers like this," Donovan says. "I think what you're seeing is a new experience for a lot of people that's putting enormous amount of stress on all of us and on the systems — both the charitable network and the public benefit network. The elastic can only expand so much."

Theresa "Tina" Cicerchia, a 43-year-old Carol Stream resident who lost her

job at the beginning of 2009, draws too much income from unemployment benefits to enroll in SNAP. Instead, she did a test run last summer at a Wheaton food pantry. "They were very, very nice," she says. But the experience rattled her. "It's hard. You never think you're going to be in that situation. It's been really eye-opening."

Washington is ramping up the food stamp program to higher levels, even with growing public concern about the federal budget deficit. The Obama administration has proposed spending \$69 billion on SNAP, more than double the \$33.2 billion that came from Washington in 2007. Observers say SNAP is politically insulated because it's administered through the agriculture agency, which enjoys bipartisan support. Still, conservative voices have worried about SNAP's burgeoning expense and have suggested that even well-meaning assistance can cultivate perpetual reliance.

Kristina Rasmussen, executive vice president of the Illinois Policy Institute, notes that states are trying to leverage as much SNAP revenue as they can because they perceive it to be "free federal money," even though all taxpayers really pay for the program. She says the federal government could do better by awarding money to states in block grants, leaving it up to them to determine how to regulate and distribute the assistance. Eligibility should be tighter, she says.

"It is a form of welfare," Rasmussen says. "[Recipients] are getting benefits every week, and there's no expectations for certain behaviors — for example, are you looking for a job, are you trying to work if you can? That's one of the main reforms that should be implemented. Right now, we're looking at a situation where one in eight Americans are getting food aid. Is that truly the poorest of the poor, and are we really setting up a good social net?"

Schanzenbach, the public policy professor from the University of Chicago, is not concerned that SNAP may be getting too big. "There are pretty tight restrictions on who's eligible," she says. "It seems to me [the expense] is a drop in the bucket, compared to other things. It's perfectly in line with our values as a nation. We don't like children to go to bed hungry." □

Mike Ramsey is a Chicago based journalist.

Call for healthy kids

Sometimes school districts are slow to fully implement fitness and nutrition programs

by Rachel Wells

Nearly one-third of American children are either overweight or obese, but this generation could be the last to see such alarming rates of childhood obesity if the country — and especially its school systems — makes proper nutrition and physical activity a top priority, federal officials say.

Raising the profile of the issue this year is First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move!" initiative, which pushes change toward better food and fitness for overall wellness. Advocates say past state and federal mandates have at least helped bring obesity to the forefront of public attention. But, while schools have adopted wellness policies and Illinois long ago established physical education requirements, those plans and programs are not always fully implemented.

And the obesity problem has continued to grow. Over the past 30 years, the rate of overweight adolescents has tripled.

At the center of the issue in recent years is the Child Nutrition Act. The federal law now encompasses such programs as school lunch, school breakfast, after-school and summer meals and snacks, and the fresh fruit and vegetable program. Congress must reauthorize the law every five years, but last year, it simply extended the programs through an agricultural bill. The last full-fledged reauthorization took place in 2004, when lawmakers required schools by the 2006 school year to develop wellness policies outlining goals for nutrition education, physical activity and school meal guidelines.

"There was a requirement that [districts] create a policy, but there was not a similar requirement that they implement [the policy]," says Angela Forfia, program manager with the Skokie-headquartered group Action for Healthy Kids, explaining that the problem is not limited to Illinois.

"It's good to have a policy, but what are you doing with it?" asks Linda Dawson, editor of the *Illinois School Board Journal*, a service of the Illinois Association of School Boards. The association, which analyzed the issue in its recent publication provided a sample policy that many districts adopted. "We would say that with any policy matter, if

Photographs courtesy of Ridgeview Community Unit School District 19



School organizers and the St. Louis Dairy Council in spring 2009 brought the Dairy Fully Fueled Tour to Ridgeview Elementary School as part of the school's wellness program. The one-day event for students in the fourth through eighth grades included nutrition lessons and physical activities such as this rock climbing food pyramid.

you don't use it, if it sits on the shelf when you make your decisions ... it's not doing the district or the students or the community any good," says Dawson, who also is a state chairwoman for Illinois Action for Healthy Kids.

A survey released in 2007 by Illinois Action for Healthy Kids and the Illinois State Board of Education's Nutrition Education and Training Program (Illinois NET) sampled 544 Illinois school districts. Of the teachers, food service directors and wellness policy team leaders who responded, 82 percent

said their districts had adopted a policy as required by law, but only 45 percent were aware of any staff training to implement the policies.

Regardless, the mandate has had some positive outcomes, Forfia says. “It moved the bar from nobody talking about this issue ... to districts recognizing that we need to do this. ... Whether you were a really fired-up school ... or you were just doing the minimal amount, you at least started the conversation about these issues.”

An Illinois Wellness Policy Task Force found in 2007 that money concerns were the biggest perceived barrier to implementing wellness policies. Participating districts also cited public reception and No Child Left Behind assessment goals as major challenges.

Dawson agrees that making time for nutrition lessons is one of the major difficulties of working to meet wellness goals. “Health curriculum has been on the curriculum for a long time, but at this time, with [No Child Left Behind], health education is not a priority. ... What gets tested gets taught” (see *Illinois Issues*, September 2009, page 15).

State Rep. Mary Flowers, a Chicago Democrat, believes the same has been true for physical education. She’s working this spring to pass legislation calling for a mandatory 10-minute morning recess. “We’ve made gym no longer mandatory ... because the school systems decided that they need to trade gym or recess for more education.”

In late 2001, then-Surgeon General David Satcher issued a “call to action” against rising overweight and obesity rates and recommended requiring daily physical education in schools for all grade levels, among other community-based strategies. Satcher cited Illinois as the only state with such a mandate, but that law — created in 1957 — is often bypassed.

In 2005, more than 25 percent of Illinois districts had received waivers or modifications for the rule. In 2010, that number had climbed to 30 percent. Reasons for seeking waivers included cost, nontraditional class scheduling, inadequate facilities and other courses.

“Our children, for these last couple generations, they have sat alone in front of a computer, in front of their Game Boy,” Flowers says. “Our good endorphins are not being shaken up in our bodies.”

Getting the body moving is essential not only to fight obesity but to improve student performance, says Terri Andrews, a Naperville teacher and chairwoman for Shake Up Illinois, an annual day-long advocacy program held at the Capitol by the Illinois Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance.

“Schools all the time are trying to find what’s the new curriculum they’re going to follow, what’s the new strategy they’re going to follow, to raise their [Illinois Standards Achievement Test] scores. It’s so simple. Look at the research on movement education.” Andrews points to student brain scans that show more activity following a 20-minute walk than after sitting still.

In 2008, a new state law limited districts’ physical education waivers to two years with two additional two-year renewals, but Andrews fears that proposals for sweeping elimination of unfunded mandates puts that limitation at risk.

Funding is also a key issue for the nutritional side of wellness, says Paula DeLuca, who is on the Illinois School Nutrition Association board of directors. “It is not an inexpensive endeavor to increase your fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as whole grains,” says DeLuca. She adds that the federal reimbursement rate is often below actual costs of producing and serving school meals. “In order to work toward what appears to be an elevated level of offerings, especially in these two areas, it will be essential for us to receive additional funding.”

Federal proposals for the 2010 Child Nutrition Act include additional investment of \$10 billion over the next 10 years. Those funds would go toward encouraging more students to take advantage of school meal offerings and improving the quality of food served in those programs.

But Forfia says funding isn’t the only — or even the most important — element in a successful wellness program. “It’s kind of like life. Money certainly helps, but I also think there has to be a will to do these things.”

“There will always be challenges,” Illinois State Board of Education spokeswoman Mary Fergus says. But districts can turn to Illinois NET and advocacy groups such as Illinois Action for Healthy Kids for expertise and tips. The two organizations are now gearing up for their annual wellness conference in May.

“You need the will, and you need a little bit of the resources, but you also need the support and the people power,” Forfia says. “Every school has wellness champions.”

For Ridgeview Elementary School in Colfax, those champions ensured that the wellness policy mandate did much more than start a conversation. “When we got that policy in place, I told our administrators that I’m not a person that wants a dead policy,” says Teresa Pratt, nurse for the McLean County school. That motivation paid off last year, when Ridgeview became the first Illinois school to meet the HealthierUS Schools Challenge.

The voluntary federal certification program is now one of the key components of the Let’s Move! initiative. To meet challenge requirements, schools must implement healthier lunch menus, provide students with nutrition education and create opportunities for increased physical activity.

Pratt says she worked with Illinois NET, which provides free help to identify potential grant opportunities and define small steps, such as consulting with a registered dietitian to revamp the school lunch menu, adding a grant-funded nutritional education curriculum and including the community in wellness events.

“The key here is strong administrative support and being aware of what’s out there and taking advantage of it,” Pratt says, listing local resources such as the nearby Illinois Wesleyan University Nursing Department and Illinois NET. She also seeks out partners such as the St. Louis District Dairy Council or the Illinois Soybean Association. “I look for free things.”

Bushnell-Prairie City Elementary School in McDonough County recently became the second Illinois school to meet the HealthierUS Schools Challenge. Bushnell-Prairie City and Ridgeview each hold a certification of “silver,” the third of four levels in the certification program.

“We started this a little over three years ago, and it took us over a year to attain,” says Bushnell-Prairie City principal

JoEllen Pensinger. "It's a lot of work ... not that it wasn't worth it, but it was submitting menu after menu. ... You have to have a very dedicated kitchen staff and a very dedicated physical education teacher." The school, which serves about 400 students — more than 57 percent of whom are classified as low-income — also had the help of a grant coordinator. "It was just a huge group effort," Pensinger says.

To qualify for the award, the school made multiple changes, including the installation of a walking path on the front lawn, Pensinger says. Weather permitting, about 300 students use their before-school down time to take a stroll.

"We don't have a lot of kids that don't do it," Pensinger says. "It's a good social time for them, too. They can walk in groups and talk. It's fun for them, and it beats just sitting in the building."

Gym class looks a little different these days, too. Students constantly move as the instructor explains the day's activities. They also learn how to move and fuel their bodies in beneficial ways.

Bushnell-Prairie City infused its regular meal-time menus with whole-grains, banned soda pop from packed lunches and established healthier snack guidelines for classroom celebrations.

Parents had a little trouble complying with new restrictions on food brought into the school at first, but there have been few problems since, Pensinger says. "It's been pretty well-accepted because it makes sense. When something makes sense, it's a little easier to patrol."

The Illinois State Board of Education administers the federally controlled and funded programs outlined by the Child Nutrition Act. As Congress is considering reauthorization of the programs, the state board is suggesting changes that would encourage greater participation in the programs and is seeking national standards for minimum meal-time minutes and all commodity products available to schools.

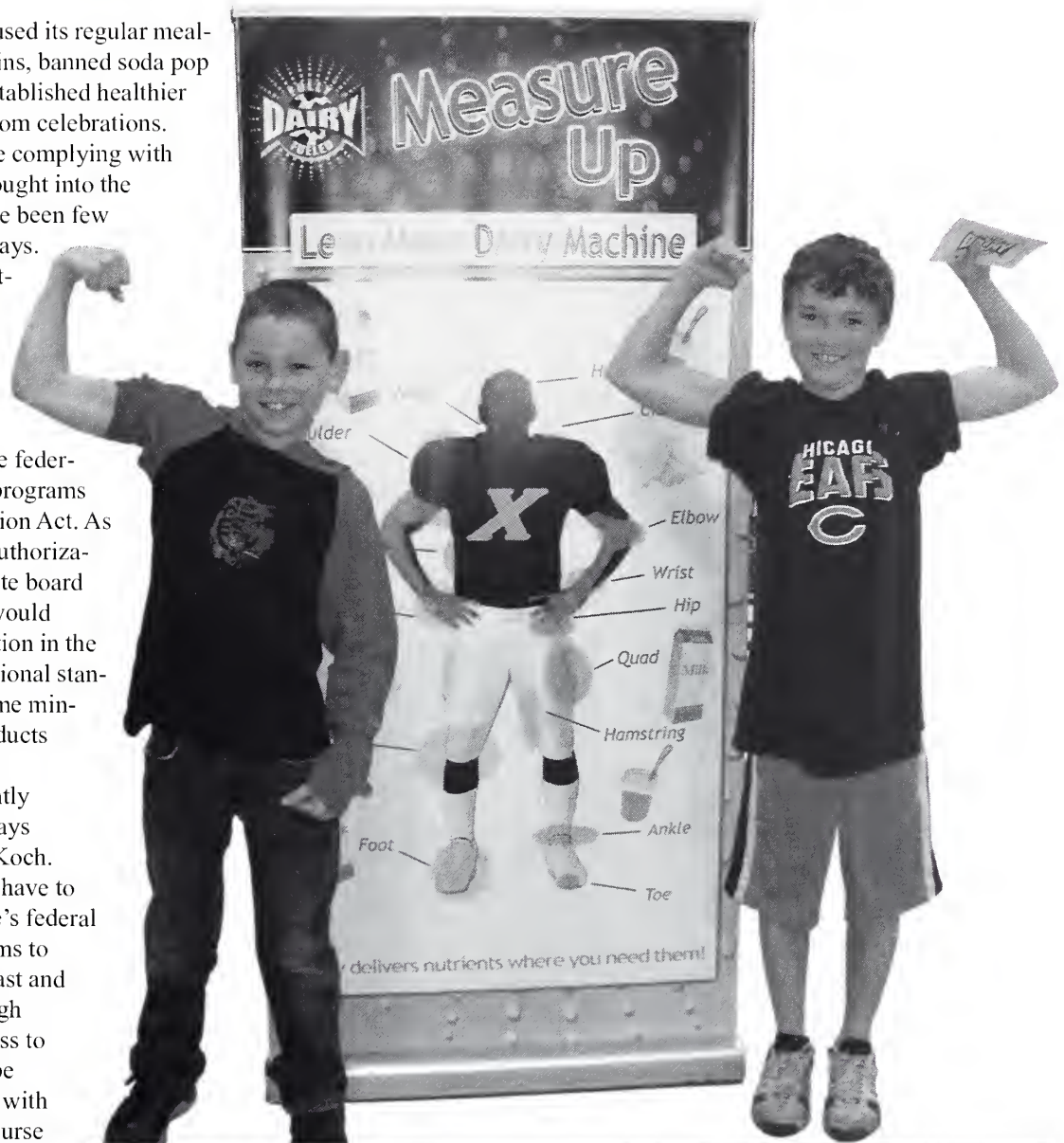
"The reforms are constantly important to think about," says state Superintendent Chris Koch. "Nutrition is important. We have to keep our focus on it, if there's federal money to help drive programs to make sure kids have breakfast and lunch in schools. There's high correlations to kids' readiness to learn if they're in good shape nutritionally. We're dealing with human beings here, so of course they're complex and have a lot of needs. All those needs are

important if we're going to have kids on the right learning trajectory where we want them to be."

While the Let's Move! campaign relies in part on changes in schools, it also focuses on educating parents and engaging entire communities. That's exactly the approach advocates and organizers say is necessary to ensure that the current wellness initiative has a significant impact on childhood obesity.

"In order for nutrition programs to provide an optimal level of benefit to students, I think we need to work in concert with all of the other stakeholders," says DeLuca. "We need to give a consistent and clear message to the students that we're serving."

"Children are in school six hours a day, five days a week. That leaves a lot of other time that they're outside of school," Dawson says. "The minute those kids step out the door, they can go to McDonald's, they can go to the guy on the street corner selling the cotton candy. ... There's nothing to prevent them from doing that." □



Fourth-graders Devon Kelly and Dylan Donovan flex their muscles after trying on professional football equipment during a Dairy Fully Fueled wellness program held at Ridgeview Elementary School last spring.

Ryan loses benefits

George Ryan, the former Republican governor, will not receive any of his pension benefits from the time he served as an elected official in Illinois.

The Illinois Supreme Court ruled that Ryan is not eligible for the benefits he earned as a Kankakee County official, state legislator and lieutenant governor. Ryan was convicted on corruption charges in 2006 and is serving his sentence in federal prison in Terre Haute, Ind. He is due for release in 2013.

Ryan was convicted of fraud, racketeering, lying to the FBI and tax violation based on crimes he committed as secretary of state and governor of Illinois. His lawsuit contended he should still receive pension funds from the offices he held that were not connected to his conviction. Six of the seven Supreme Court justices did not agree.

The court ruled that although Ryan may have had different jobs, he broke the law and betrayed the trust of a single employer. Just because he did not do that in every job he held, the court said it does not mean that employer should now have to pay him a pension. "As the victims of Ryan's crimes, the

taxpayers of the State of Illinois are under no obligation to now fund his retirement."

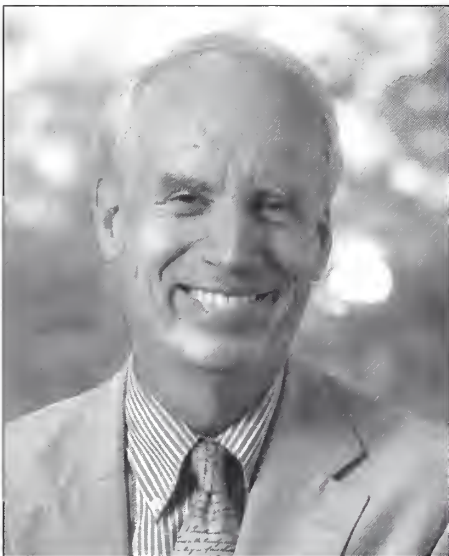
Justice Anne Burke, a Democrat, wrote the dissenting opinion. She said that the court contradicted earlier rulings that allowed officials to keep pensions from public jobs after they had been convicted of wrongdoing in another office. Burke said that there must be a connection between the crime and the job to take pension benefits away.

"I understand the very human impulse to want to punish Ryan for his wrongdoings by depriving him of all of his pension benefits. However, while I sympathize with such impulses, our constitutional obligation is to follow the law, not our personal preferences," Burke wrote in her opinion.

Ryan's family has renewed a push to have him pardoned. The *Chicago Sun-Times* reported in February that Ryan's son, George Ryan Jr., wrote a letter to President Barack Obama asking for his father's release. The family is trying to get Ryan out early so he can spend time with his terminally ill wife, Lura Lynn Ryan.

Jamey Dunn

Honors



Michael Burlingame

Michael Burlingame, the Chancellor Naomi B. Lynn Distinguished Chair of Lincoln Studies at the University of Illinois Springfield, will be awarded the 2010 Lincoln Prize this month for his book, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*.

Burlingame, considered one of the foremost living authorities on the 16th president, will receive the \$50,000 Lincoln Prize, as well as a bronze replica of Augustus Saint-Gaudens' life-size bust, *Lincoln the Man*, April 27 at the Union League in New York.

"It feels very gratifying, indeed, to win the 2010 Lincoln Prize," Burlingame says. "I've been working on Lincoln for over 25 years, and I worked on this book for 11 years. ... I really loved doing all of the research and finding so much new information on Lincoln."

The Lincoln Prize, sponsored by Gettysburg College and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, was co-founded in 1990 by businessmen and philanthropists Richard Gilder and Lewis Lehrman.

Burlingame, who was born in Washington, D.C., says he developed an interest in Lincoln as a student at Princeton University in Princeton, N.J.

"As a freshman, I took a course on the Civil War taught by David Herbert Donald," Burlingame recalls. "He was a mesmerizing lecturer, and after that class, I then became his research assistant as a sophomore." Upon graduation, Burlingame followed Donald, a Lincolnian, to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where he received a doctorate degree in history in 1971.

Abraham Lincoln: A Life, the two-volume biography Burlingame began working on in 1997, was published in 2008 by Johns Hopkins University Press. The culmination of nearly 30 years of research, it offers a comprehen-

sive look at Lincoln's life and is being heralded as one of the most thorough biographies on Abraham Lincoln.

"It is the most complete work on Abraham Lincoln that has been produced," says Janet Morgan Riggs, president of Gettysburg College. "Though its length appears intimidating, it is really quite accessible. It's an amazing work, and I think it's without peer."

Burlingame says he hopes to use the Lincoln Prize money to fund more Lincoln-related projects, such as the compilation of some of Lincoln's anonymous writings for the Springfield newspaper, the *Sangamo Journal*, later called the *Illinois State Journal*, and now the *State-Journal Register*. He is currently working on an online version of *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* for Knox College in Galesburg, as well as a one-volume abridgment of the biography.

As a recipient of the Lincoln Prize, Burlingame joins renowned past winners, such as Allen Guelzo, who won for his books, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* in 2000 and *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* in 2005, and Doris Kearns Goodwin, who won in 2006 for her book, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*.

Nicole Harbour

Big people on campus



Richard Ringeisen

Richard Ringeisen, University of Illinois Springfield chancellor, announced last month that he plans to retire in October.

Ringeisen said in making his announcement March 1 that he believed it was time for him to move on, and he wants to spend more time with his family. "I know it may sound like a cliché, but I will be 66 years old in a couple of weeks, and I believe it's the right time for me to step down after being at UIS for nearly nine years. It's just time." Ringeisen said he plans to stay until October 31 to help the university get started on what will be a difficult fiscal year and to be involved in a 40th anniversary celebration planned for mid-October.

Meanwhile, the U of I Board of

Trustees decided to pay Ringeisen a salary of \$273,500 for a year of administrative leave after his retirement, as per an agreement he made upon coming to UIS. Though it was proposed that he serve as special assistant to the president and consultant for long-range planning from November 1, 2010, through December 31, 2011, the board opted to abide by the 2001 agreement.

He previously served at East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C., as vice chancellor of academic affairs and chief academic officer. He was also dean of the College of Sciences and professor of mathematics at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Va.; and mathematics professor and department head at Clemson University in Clemson, S.C.

Since Ringeisen became chancellor in 2001, UIS enrollment has increased by 16 percent and the faculty has grown by 24 percent. In addition, several new facilities, including a recreation and athletic center, have been added during his tenure.

In a prepared statement, interim University of Illinois President Stanley Ikenberry said: "Chancellor Ringeisen and his team have moved UIS forward in many ways in the past nine years.

"I enjoy hearing people say how much they admire what's happening at UIS. . . UIS is well-positioned to advance and progress in every way, which is very good news for students and faculty."

For more information about people see the Illinois Issues Web site at <http://illinoisissues.uis.edu>

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Reader discovers *Illinois Issues* at the newsstand

I must first say that I have never read the *Illinois Issues* publication until today when I was in my local Borders bookstore. Not only have I not read your publication, I don't recall noticing it on the shelf. I'm sure it's been there, but up until now, I was unaware of the magazine. I bought January's issue for one thing, the story regarding Oprah Winfrey. The photo on the cover caught my attention.

My girlfriends and I have on more than a dozen occasions, okay, 15 occasions to be exact, made the trip up highway 55, from southern Illinois to Chicago, to sit in the studio audience of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. And yes, we brought our dollars with us and gladly left several behind in the big city. We spent money on hotel rooms, eating establishments, shops all over town, bars, taxis and even donated a few dollars for a parking ticket or two.

I know I speak for many when I say Chicago is a fun city to visit. Chicago has everything to offer and is easy to



navigate. My girlfriends and I will dearly miss *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. However, it will not keep us from taking the windy city by storm. There will always be theater performances, fabulous eateries, boats on the shore and many magnificent miles of shopping to draw us there.

Thanks again for the great article featuring Oprah's contribution to the city. I promise to keep an eye out for your monthly publication from now on.

Carol Kohler
Edwardsville



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Illinois Issues
One University Plaza, MS HRB 10
University of Illinois at Springfield
Springfield, IL 62704-5407
e-mail address on Internet:
heupel.dana@uis.edu

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Charles N. Wheeler III



Leaders have responded abysmally to the state's fiscal crisis

by Charles N. Wheeler III

Illinois faces its worst fiscal crisis in eight decades, a daunting challenge for the state's purported leaders. So how have they responded?

In a word, abysmally. Indeed, the leadership deficit almost rivals the state's dollar shortfall. Consider:

In his budget memo last month — at 21 minutes, too short and devoid of specifics to merit being called an address — Gov. Pat Quinn essentially punted.

The Democrat did call for a one-third increase in income tax rates, which he said would avert planned cuts in school spending and allow the state to pay some bills, paring the deficit by a few hundred million dollars.

But he also chose to defer some \$11 billion in red ink for another day.

His Republican opponent, state Sen. Bill Brady of Bloomington, termed the governor's proposal a "catastrophe," but he had little to offer as a rational alternative. In fact, former Republican Gov. Jim Edgar politely deemed "naive" the GOP hopeful's "cut-10-percent-across-the-board" campaign sound bite.

Democratic House Speaker Michael Madigan and Republican Minority Leader Tom Cross, meanwhile, remained locked in a partisan standoff that had nothing to do with good public policy but everything to do with the November election.

Madigan won't allow the House to vote on a proposed income tax increase unless

What no one disputes is the enormity of the problem.

some Republicans are willing to support it; Cross says none will, mostly because GOP strategists figure they have a winning hand whether the state implodes — "It's all the Democrats' fault; they control everything" — or taxes are raised without GOP help — "It's the Democrats' fault; they raised your taxes."

What no one disputes is the enormity of the problem. Heading into the fiscal year that starts July 1, Illinois is facing a \$13-plus billion shortfall between the cost of maintaining existing programs and the money likely to be there to pay for them. The gap equals roughly half of the state's current general funds budget, the state's equivalent of a checkbook account.

In a feeble effort to deal with the deficit, Quinn proposed cutting current programs by about \$2.7 billion, with about \$1 billion of the savings shifted to boost Medicaid spending to capture more federal matching funds. Major cuts would include:

- \$1.2 billion in money earmarked for local public schools and an additional \$90 million in higher education funding,

which would be restored if the income tax hike passes.

- \$325 million in health care costs, by requiring retired state workers to pay more for health coverage and slicing in half prescription drug assistance for seniors.

- \$276 million from human services programs such as child care, community mental health services, and home care for older adults.

- \$300 million by reducing state aid to cities and counties.

- \$203 million by requiring state workers to take furlough days and to pay more for health insurance.

- \$300 million in pension costs by reducing benefits for new state employees.

Even assuming that the proposed reductions and the income tax increase will pass — a monumental leap of faith — the resulting FY 2011 budget still would be some \$11 billion out of whack, more than 40 percent of its total.

The governor's solution? Borrow about \$5 billion and simply don't pay the rest; just roll the bills over until FY 2012.

Brady and his Republican cohorts, meanwhile, seem content to heckle from the sidelines. They blasted Quinn for proposing a tax increase while unemployment rates are high; they lambasted him for wanting to borrow billions with no clear way to repay it; they castigated him

for threatening to cut education. What they failed to do, though, was offer viable, real-time solutions.

Take Brady's signature 10 percent cut. Were the legislature to follow his advice and pare 10 percent from every spending line, the savings would amount to less than \$3 billion. Moreover, some items can't be cut at all. For example, state law requires that debt service — the principal and interest the state pays on bonds, an estimated \$1.6 billion in FY 2011 — be paid in full, even if no funds are included in the budget.

Two other standbys in the GOP rhetoric — managed care for Medicaid recipients and scaled-back pensions for new hires — merit debate as public policy options. Pension changes in particular could produce significant future savings. But neither suggestion would do much to close the current gap between costs and revenues.

In fact, only one candidate for governor has a comprehensive plan to solve the state's budget crisis, one in which the

numbers actually work: the Green Party's Rich Whitney. The Carbondale attorney issued a 21-page platform on the state's tax structure and economic development, laying out in considerable detail his ideas for fixing the structural budget deficit and building a full employment economy (<http://www.whitneyforgov.org/issues/economy>).

In contrast, Brady's Web site (<http://bradyforillinois.com/about/bill-brady-on-the-issues>) devotes 193 words to the senator's thoughts on balancing the budget and an additional 265 to his ideas on "saving and growing" jobs. Whitney endorses income and sales tax increases coupled with tax relief for middle- and lower-income families, good for some \$7 billion, and he would cut \$2 billion that he says "exists only to reward political supporters of favored legislators," such as patronage hires and pork-barrel projects.

Perhaps his boldest suggestion, though, is a financial transactions tax on what he terms "speculative trading" such as

futures, options and interest rate products. The value of such securities traded on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and the Chicago Board Options Exchange topped \$1 quadrillion in 2008, Whitney says, so a tax measured in 10-thousandths of 1 percent would produce more than \$4 billion.

Other proposals — a greenhouse gas fee, a state bank, legalizing and taxing marijuana — would generate additional revenue in the future to bolster school funding, health care, social services and other programs.

Whitney's ideas may strike one as unconventional; certainly they're controversial. But unlike Quinn's half-measures and the GOP's sound bites, the Green candidate's platform squarely addresses the state's deficit and proposes detailed solutions.

Voters weary of the political games played by the two major parties might find that refreshing. □

Charles N. Wheeler III is director of the Public Affairs Reporting program at the University of Illinois Springfield.

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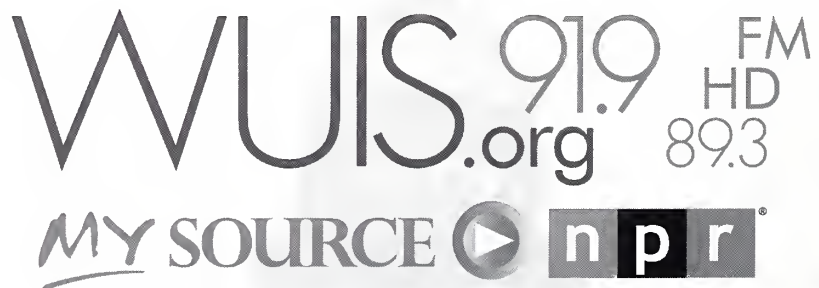
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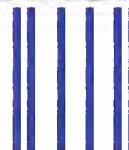


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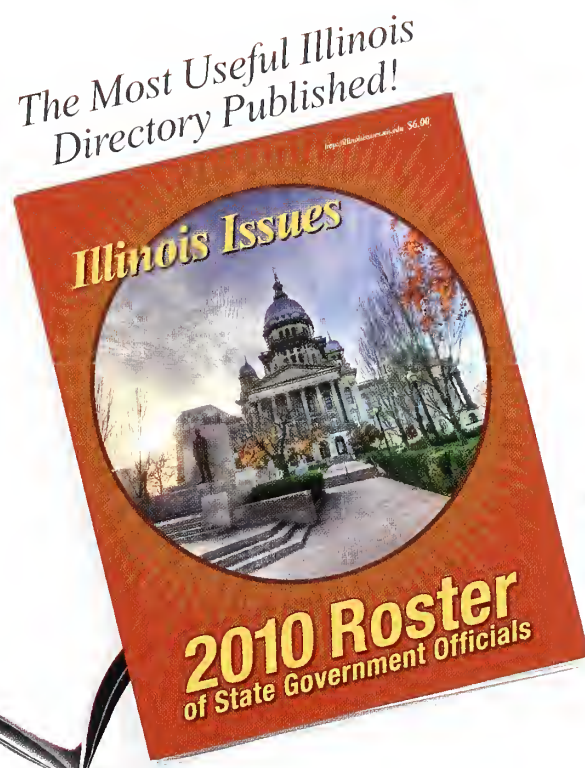
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